ALIGN REPORT

Men in politics as agents of gender equitable change: gender norms and political masculinities

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Key findings

- Men in politics have the potential to be agents of change for gender equality. Yet most gender equality supporters in the three case study countries (Colombia, Liberia and Malaysia) refuse the feminist label and describe themselves as allies, advocates or supporters of feminism, gender equality and women.

- Understanding their reasons for refusing to identify as feminists can shine a light on how feminist civil society can work to achieve gender equality at a time of anti-gender and anti-feminist politics.

- The refusal of men politicians to adopt a feminist label is a calculation that considers three interconnected factors:

  – personal: their convictions, motivations, personal relationships and experiences

  – institutional: the costs and benefits of challenging norms in political parties, parliaments and other institutions that are perpetuated by their male peers, as well as the global pro-gender equality normative architecture

  – societal: potential electoral repercussions from citizens who either may want to defend 'traditional' patriarchal norms and reject gender equality, especially through debates about Westernisation and under the influence of anti-gender movements, or those who seek more progressive politicians and might be drawn to equality discourse and policies.

- Another key issue that shapes the political calculations and decisions of men in politics who work on gender equality is a focus on addressing women's issues rather than masculinities, whether in politics or across society at large. Most of their work on gender equality is focused on women, with only limited consideration of masculinities.

- As a result of these calculations, the way in which men politicians enact their allyship and support is diverse – from being silent sympathisers to proactive developers of their own gender equality initiatives. While their political parties may differ, their activism is influenced by the extent of the alignment of their party agendas with gender equality.

- Feminist activists, women politicians and young people find it hard to identify men who are feminist politicians or those who truly care about gender equality and could have such a label applied to them. Such pro-equality men are perceived as too few, disconnected from the feminist movements and each other and often 'not doing enough'. As a result, they have not changed the perceptions of politics as masculinist and men dominated, nor have they introduced alternative political masculinities.

- As a result of the prevailing patriarchal political discourse and overall distrust of political representatives, even men politicians who support and promote gender equality are viewed with scepticism and suspicion, though activists and women politicians recognise them as necessary and potentially helpful agents of pro-equality change.

Key terms

Allies/allyship: 'members of privileged social groups who engage in collective action on behalf of disadvantaged groups, such as white people joining Black Lives Matter protests' (Hartwich et al., 2023: 1576).

Feminism(s): as defined by scholar and philosopher bell hooks, feminism can be seen as a 'movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression' (hooks, 2000). While sharing the goal of women's equality, feminist movements are diverse in their understanding of the root causes of inequalities, as well as pathways to change, as a result of various ontological traditions related to the philosophical study of 'being'.

Gender norms: the formal and informal rules that set the expectations of people to be understood by other members of the society. These vary across contexts and are shaped by other systems of power and oppression (Harper et al., 2020).

Intersectionality: 'a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It's not simply that there's a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LBGTQI+ problem there. Many times that framework erases what happens to people who are subject to all of these things' (Crenshaw, 2017).

Masculinities: '…those behaviours, languages and practices, existing in specific cultural and organisational locations, which are commonly associated with men, thus culturally defined as not feminine' (Whitehead and Barrett, 2001: 15–16).

Political masculinities: broadly defined as 'encompass[ing] any kind of masculinity that is constructed around, ascribed to and/or claimed by 'political players'. These shall be individuals or groups of persons who are part of or associated with the 'political domain', i.e. professional politicians, party members, members of the military as well as citizens and members of political movements claiming or gaining political rights' (Starck and Sauer, 2014: 6).

Pro-feminism: The social and political perspective that is assumed and exercised as active support for feminism, which translates into efforts in favour of gender justice and equality. Some pro-feminist men are involved in political activism. Some of the most common areas of involvement are men's violence (Serrano Amaya and García Suarez, 2024).

Introduction: men in politics and feminist change

> Because men are a fundamental element of women's ascent to power, the strategy of ignoring or bypassing them will rarely be effective.
> (Valdini, 2019: 150)

A growing number of men politicians have explicitly and openly labelled themselves, their politics and institutions as feminist since the mid-2000s (Aggestam and True, 2020). They include French President Emmanuel Macron, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau (Flood and Ertel, 2020; Sabin and Kirkup, 2019) and former President George Weah of Liberia who declared himself the country's 'Feminist-in-Chief' in 2018. Men in politics who evoke feminism may – on the surface at least – suggest a positive shift towards greater efforts to achieve gender equality and a faster pace of change as a result of the work of new male allies.

Men in political institutions can be agents of change for gender equality and feminist goals (Luyt and Starck, 2020; Celis and Childs, 2012). This is because they hold both a prominent symbolic role in public discourse and financial, legal, and other forms of capital (and therefore power), which can reduce the risks and costs of acting against gender injustice, although it does not eliminate them (Drury and Kaiser, 2014; Subašić et al., 2018; Kutlaca et al., 2020).

As Wiley et al. find, if feminist men are portrayed positively, they can help other men to become feminist sympathisers and activists (2013). Their speeches, policies and other gendered actions within and through their political institutions also help to shape the normative environment in which feminist activists operate. They can create enabling conditions for gender transformative work, because they have the power to shape laws, such as the passing of gender quota legislations, through their political parties and other mechanisms. This can support the rise of more women into positions of power or the allocation of public resources to gender equality initiatives. As the quote from Melody Valdini (2019) at the start of this introduction suggests, changing harmful patriarchal systems of power – and the political institutions through which they are maintained – can be enabled by those in power, including men politicians.

By claiming feminist identities and politics, men politicians are seemingly challenging the status quo, as feminist goals and politics have historically been, and continue to be, driven largely by women and LGBTQI+ people as members of groups that have been marginalized on the basis of their gender and sexuality (Wiley et al., 2013; Bergqvist et al., 2016). While some citizens and activists see the feminist statements of men politicians as a signal of their commitment to addressing gender inequalities, others see them as rhetorical grandstanding to garner votes.

It is estimated it will take 162 years to close the political gender gap, a timeframe that has actually increased in recent years (World Economic Forum, 2023). Meanwhile, as part of the ongoing crisis of democracy, patriarchal, men-led governments in many parts of the world deliberately adopt feminist policies to 'gender wash' their de-democratising activities. For example, they support quotas to increase women's numerical political representation, such as the number of women in parliament, but do not change the underlying power structures in a way that would enable women to address gender equality issues more effectively (Bush and Zetterberg, 2021; Bjarnegård and Zetterberg, 2022; Chenoweth and Marks, 2022).

The support of men politicians for gender equality may also be against their own interests, as men reap the benefits of male privilege in politics and strive to stay in power once they obtain their political positions (Harper et al., 2020). At the same time, however, these men may associate themselves with the negative stereotypes about feminisms that are held, in particular, by other men, and risk losing support among some voters (Galea and Gaweda, 2018). It is essential, therefore, to ask when and why men in politics take up the gender equality agenda and claim a feminist identity, and whether they contribute to a gender transformative process if they do so.

The research project

The research project *Men in politics as agents of gender equitable change* examined how men politicians understand and describe their support for gender equality, the factors that shape their decisions and practices, and what women politicians, activists, and university students think about them and their work. The objective was to capture conditions that have the potential to be reproduced across various country contexts to increase the presence of agents of gender equitable change and explore whether such efforts should be prioritised and funded.

The project has responded, therefore, to increasingly intense calls for the engagement of men in gender equality work, particularly as more donors and philanthropists support these engagement efforts (Wells et al., 2024). It has also coincided with concerns among some feminists about the depletion of already limited resources available for gender equality work with women and girls, be it through official development assistance (ODA) or private philanthropy (Mama Cash, 2022; George and Gulrajani, 2023), and concerns that the feminist label is being depoliticised and emptied of its transformative potential by men in politics, among other actors.

This study of individual men brings together studies of feminist political representation, political masculinities (Hearn, 2024), and male feminist allyship (Casey, 2010; Drury and Kaiser, 2014; Halvorsen, 2023) at a time of anti-gender and anti-feminist mobilization. It complements the existing body of literature on feminist movements and women's activism (Chappell, 2006; Subašić et al., 2018), which highlights the importance of independent local and international feminist and women's organising in driving changes to gender norms (Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez et al., 2021).
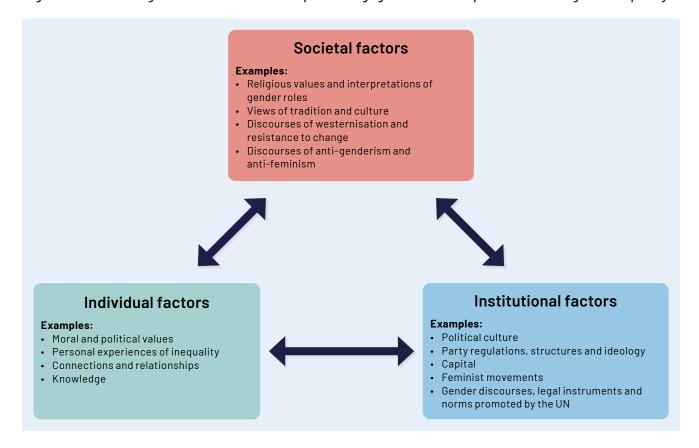
It also speaks to a large body of scholarship on feminist institutionalism and the masculinist nature of political parties, parliaments and other institutions (Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer, 2012; Bjarnegård, 2018; Lowndes, 2020; Childs and Palmieri, 2023). Lastly, the project contributes to the limited literature on masculinities and men in politics in the countries of the Global South[1], albeit with a small sample of countries that cannot fully capture the diversity of this group of nations.

This report draws on country studies from Colombia, Liberia and Malaysia that used qualitative, interview, and focus group discussion, based data. All three countries had high level men politicians between 2018 and 2022 who proclaimed support for feminist foreign policies; but they have diverse socio-political conditions and histories. Through a cross-country comparison, this study considers gender norms and other factors that could enable the rise of men politicians who support gender equality. These factors are grouped in three different but inter-related categories, as shown in Figure 1.

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[1]   Throughout the report the authors use the terms Global South/North, as well as global majority/minority countries interchangeably. While the authors recognise the colonial genealogies of these terms in their binaries and their insufficiency in capturing the diversity of the countries they bring together, they use these terms as productive shorthand to demonstrate the current debate on global inequalities.

Figure 1: Three categories of factors that shape the engagement of men politicians with gender equality

Societal factors

Examples:
- Religious values and interpretations of gender roles
- Views of tradition and culture
- Discourses of westernisation and resistance to change
- Discourses of anti-genderism and anti-feminism

Individual factors

Examples:
- Moral and political values
- Personal experiences of inequality
- Connections and relationships
- Knowledge

Institutional factors

Examples:
- Political culture
- Party regulations, structures and ideology
- Capital
- Feminist movements
- Gender discourses, legal instruments and norms promoted by the UN

Source: Authors based on country reports

Key findings

The study finds that most men participants who work on gender equality refuse to claim a feminist identity as they understand it, and that they favour alternative labels, such as ally, advocate, supporter, champion, progressive or humanist.[2] This refusal by men politicians to self-identify as feminists and their preference for different ways to communicate their commitments to gender equality are the result of calculations based on a number of factors. These range from concerns over the role of tradition, culture and religion in society, to responses to feminist movements, social justice activism, global political efforts and local discourses around Westernisation and development as they understand them in their contexts. These factors intertwine with the fact that most of the men participating in this study did not discuss, consider or in any way problematise their own masculinities or the wider currents of masculinity within their particular socio-economic context. Instead, they focused on women's experiences, empowerment and rights.

Interviews and focus groups with women politicians, activists and students show that men politicians are having a relatively limited influence on the perceptions of participants of politics as a harmful and gendered space where men tend to perform masculinities that are inequitable. Their responses suggest that men politicians who support feminism and gender equality seem to be few and far between in the study countries, and largely invisible amid the misogynist vitriol and harmful

2   The authors distinguish several key socio-political standpoints held by men in response to women's inequality in patriarchal societies, namely those articulated via feminism, pro-feminism, gender equality, or women's equality, empowerment and rights. These do not constitute an exhaustive list, but have been used most commonly by researchers and practitioners. While the authors approach them as different when the distinction matters to the men politicians and to the analysis, they refer to men who support gender equality to represent them collectively.

masculinist practices that continue to define politics. Indeed, these men are perceived by the other participants in this study through a broader lens of distrust in politics, which puts them under further suspicion and exposes them to charges of inauthenticity.

About this report

The remainder of this report is structured as follows. An outline of the key concepts and literature that underpin this study is followed by the methods and limitations of the research. Three sections on findings then focus on the framing of men politicians' gender equality work and motivations; barriers to and enablers of their engagement; and the perceptions of students, activists and women in politics. The final two sections summarise findings and set implications for policy makers, activists and researchers.

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Men in politics: power, privilege and change

This section reviews four bodies of scholarship that shape the research on men in politics as agents of change for gender equality: gender norms and political masculinities; feminist critical actors and institutions; male allyship; and gender performance in politics. It draws out the connections across these bodies of work and highlight how they are situated within the current context of global anti-gender and anti-feminist backlash and politics, which, in turn, shape the context in which men in politics operate.

Gender norms and political masculinities

> 'Political masculinities' encompasses any kind of masculinity that is constructed around, ascribed to and/or claimed by 'political players'. These shall be individuals or groups of persons who are part of or associated with the 'political domain', i.e. professional politicians, party members, members of the military as well as citizens and members of political movements claiming or gaining political rights.
> (Starck and Sauer, 2014: 6)

The field of political masculinities studies is a relatively niche area and is dominated by studies from the countries of the Global North. As the above definition from Starck and Sauer (2014) suggests, political masculinities are relatively open to interpretation, especially in terms of what spaces or domains are political or the actors to which they are attached (Messerschmidt, 2023). While masculinities in general can be understood as political (evoking the feminist notion that gender equality issues should be political), this project focuses on the domain of politics specifically (Luyt and Starck, 2020). In other words, it focuses on men in formal or mainstream politics as a sub-domain within the wider literature on political masculinities (Hearn, 2024).

The terms 'men in politics' and 'men politicians' is used interchangeably, includes men in the military or traditional chiefs in the countries of study and, therefore, embraces a broad definition of 'political players' based on the context-specific understanding of formal politics across the three countries. In addition, many men move across various spheres of policy and politics in their professional lives, not least leaving civil society or the military to enter formal politics, which further emphasises the need for a broad definition. Military people, chiefs or civil servants who are outside the legislative or executive institutions and who would not traditionally be labelled as 'politicians', and might even refuse that label, are therefore included.

Many men in politics, and some women, seek to demonstrate traits and behaviours that represent hegemonic masculinities – an idealised set of norms of what it means to be a man at a particular time, and which rewards those who meet the expectations with power and privileges, including access to political leadership roles and positions (Connell, 2005; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Most men are not able to live up to the hegemonic norms which retain highest societal value, either globally or in a specific context (Connell, 1987; Courtenay, 2000; Kupers, 2005). In the current context these norms include, for example, aggression, lack of consideration for others, homophobia, a ceaseless interest in sex, control of others and misogyny, as well as the devaluation of femininity (Van Doorn and March, 2021: 306).

The global version of hegemonic masculinity, which may differ from local versions of the masculinity that is most desired, is therefore defined in opposition and in relation to femininities as well as other, alternative or subordinate masculinities (Schippers, 2007; Hurley, 2018; Linders et al., 2022; Parmanand, 2022) and upheld by complicit masculinities (Wolfman, 2023). In many parts of Latin America, for example, various iterations of machismo represent hegemonic masculinities in politics, against which all other sub-alternate masculinities are measured and articulated (Goicolea et al., 2014) (see Box 1). They uphold, therefore, a binary understanding of sex and gender to the exclusion and marginalisation of other gender identities.

> ### Box 1: Machismo and caudillismo culture in Latin America
>
> 'The concept of "machismo", has been a matter of intense discussion when associated with Latin American cultures because it characterizes them in essentialist ways, making invisible the structural conditions that produced and resulted from gender inequality.'
>
> 'Caudillismo captures the experience of Latin American electoral politics, being dominated by men who are 'populist, authoritarian and individualist' and exercise power through 'patriarchal, heterosexist, classist, and racist masculinity that continued colonial power.'
>
> *Source: Serrano Amaya and García Suárez, 2024: TBC*

Current hegemonic political masculinities also include a level of physical power, manifested or tied to the military, and sexual prowess. Examples of hegemonic political masculinities include:

> the strong man, the authoritarian, the national leader (nationalist, fascist, liberatory?), the showman, the smooth operator, the fixer, the revolutionary, the statesman, the misogynist, the hero, even the post-heroic.
> (Hearn, 2020: 5)

Leaders like Vladimir Putin (Smith, 2016), Victor Orbán, Recep Erdoğan (Ozbay and Soybakis, 2020), Donald Trump or Rodrigo Duterte (Parmanand, 2022), represent political masculinities that can be described as dominating and seeking to differentiate women and GBTQI+ men as subordinate to cis/heterosexual men. In certain contexts, the views of these leaders intersect with capitalist value-systems of consumption that are fuelled by extractive behaviours that are harmful to the climate and with autocratic tendencies, which Cara Daggett (2018) terms 'petro masculinity.'

Studies of political masculinities tend to approach norms as explanatory factors behind crises and socio-political changes, including wars, financial crises, terrorism, authoritarian relapse and attacks against feminism and gender equality change (Dudink et al., 2004; Starck and Luyt, 2019). They tend to focus, therefore, on men who strive towards these hypermasculine gender-unequal ideals.

There are two notable exceptions. The first is a study by Wells et al. (2024) for the Canadian Department of Women and Gender Equality, which examines the motivations and experiences of feminists, pro-feminists or gender equality advocates who identify as men. Their study concludes that to engage more men in this work, it is necessary to meet them where they are, create more safe spaces, and adopt an intersectional approach to understanding their lived realities. The second is an interview-based analysis of young Swedish feminist men in politics by Ekelund (2020). This finds men are able to find their place within feminism both as its members and its objects, and can find orientations within it despite the complexities that the process entails. However, as Murray and Bjarnegård (2023) highlight, masculinities can be brought into the studies of political institutions more systematically, particularly with a different definition, in order to better understand the dominance of men in politics.

Changing norms and alternative masculinities in the global context

The maintenance of people's adherence to gender norms is an exercise of power and a way to sustain the patriarchal status quo and hegemonic ideals. It is often practiced through discourses that articulate what it means to be a 'real man' and punishing those who transgress the expected. Harris (2022) highlights that men who are not able to meet the expected norms under pressure from their peers often respond with various forms of backlash, including intimate partner violence. Giving up power and the so-called 'patriarchal dividend' – the privileges that are automatically bestowed on men in every patriarchal society – makes it difficult for men to support and engage in gender equality (Connell, 2005: 1808).

Yet the patriarchal dividend is experienced unevenly, with the potential for masculinities that occupy hegemonic positions to experience a greater loss in comparison to masculinities that are more subordinate, which are further marginalised by intersecting systems of power, such as class, race, sexuality, gender identity or age (Harnois, 2017). For example, some men politicians have performed political leadership in non-stereotypical gendered ways. In Canada, Justin Trudeau adopted emotive and sensitive behaviours when running to become Prime Minister against the conservative candidate Stephen Harper (Sabin and Kirkup, 2019), who portrayed a traditional image of a strong assertive male leader. In Sierra Leone, Minister of Education David Sengeh, gained global recognition during the COVID-19 pandemic when he carried his daughter on his back during a meeting, demonstrating involved fatherhood and, therefore, transgressing social norms attached to powerful men politicians. Former US president Barack Obama also challenged conventions when he cried during several speeches on issues such as gun violence (Smith, 2016).

As these examples suggest, masculinities are not uniform or static: they are constantly evolving and changing (Jewkes et al., 2015). For example, some scholars argue that gender did not serve as the primary organising principle for some pre-colonial societies in West and Southern Africa (Amadiume, 1989; Assie-Lumumba,1997; Oyěwùmí, 1997). Therefore, sex-based gender systems did not always dictate social hierarchies or affect political power. Instead, power was shaped primarily by seniority or age (Tamale, 2020) or, in some contexts, other forms of difference such as clan or family lineage (McClintock, 1993; Singerman, 1995). Colonisation, however, contributed to the transformation of systems of power, with the violent imposition of European patriarchal, gender-based norms based on the racialized superiority of white men's hegemonic masculinity merging with local systems (Patil, 2009).

The othering of marginalised men today occurs along multiple axes of power, not least race and geography and thus the differentiation between Global North and South. For example, men from racial minorities are accused of gender bias, violence and 'backward' behaviour. This includes, in particular, those who are racialised as Black and those who are Muslim. Pro-feminist and feminist men, or those supporting gender equality are then constructed as the 'civilised' because they do not demonstrate such traits and behaviours (Ging, 2019).

These practices intersect with class difference, whereby educated men of upper socio-economic class can be seen as part of the global hegemonic masculinity and tie modernity and civilisation to the former colonisers in the Global North. Colonial and racialised gender systems also continue to be deployed in post-colonial societies as part of nation-building projects, with calls for modernity over tradition often mobilised to accumulate state power. Currently, however, various groups of men struggle to attain and maintain power and control through the discourses of men's tradition against the process of Westernisation, as will be discussed in the findings section of this report (Patil, 2009).

Gender norms and hegemonic masculinity are not merely imposed and followed, but also constantly challenged. As Starck and Luyt highlight:

> gender order is crisis-prone… this is seen as a result of inherent contradictions and tensions in gender practices. These ensure that hegemonic masculinities are always undergoing challenge and change in order to offer a more successful strategy of legitimizing some men's dominance over women and marginalize or subordinated men.
> (Starck and Luyt, 2019: 3)

Changes in masculinities have resulted in various articulations of amalgamated (Gater, 2023) or hybrid masculinities (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014). For example, Anderson and McCormack (2018) argue young working-class boys in the UK have lower levels of homophobia and demonstrate more physical homo-social tactility, which to the authors suggests changes towards new forms of masculinity that are more inclusive. This is, however, disputed by other scholars who argue that despite such changes in the behaviours of individual young men, the hegemonic norms that are based on heterosexuality and homophobia are maintained (de Boise, 2015) and in some instances even lead to young men adopting more anti-feminist and conservative attitudes (Duffy et al., 2024).

Not every change in masculinity norms can be seen as a progressive feminist accomplishment. The patriarchal gender order itself can absorb and change the equity agenda, which drives scepticism and concern among many feminists about men's engagement in gender equality and its genuine commitment to equity and justice. In the US, for example, Messner notes important shifts in modern masculinities for a specific milieu of men that shape their relationship to feminism. He writes:

> A central aspect of privileged men's gender strategies in recent years, after all, is to present one's self as an educated modern man who is supportive of gender equality. And this is achieved partially by projecting atavistic sexism onto less educated men, poor men, immigrant men and men of color.
> (Messner, 2016: 13)

Similarly, Smith points out that many men in politics in the 1990s in the Global North embraced alternative masculinities of a 'new man' – one who shared in fathering responsibilities and chores (Smith, 2016). However, they did so in an attempt to win women's votes. Nonetheless, political leaders have always adopted diverse masculinities, including, for example, many post-colonial African leaders who presented themselves as philosophers, public intellectuals and poets (Mazrui, 1990). Therefore, despite the opportunities offered by these new masculinities, they still carry risks for women-led feminist activism and gender equality organising.

While men can and do hold feminist and pro-feminist views and embrace gender-liberatory politics (hooks, 2000; Mutunga, 2009), such men are often stifled by the misrepresentation that feminist values lead to effeminate masculinity. This acts as a barrier, in particular, for those men whose career (e.g. politicians) depends on their adherence to hegemonic masculine norms (hooks, 2000). In their study of the 2004 Political Conventions in US, Cunningham et al. (2013) found the Republican Party constructed a hegemonic masculinity that emasculated opponents by associating them with femininity.

Masculinities in the politics-military nexus are also changing (Duncanson, 2015; Dharmapuri and Shoemaker, 2017; Hurley, 2018; Myrttinen, 2019). These include peacekeeping masculinities that are feminised because of the focus of their missions in comparison to soldiers in combat, yet still retain othering qualities in relation to the people of the Global South. Other positions and identities include gender equality supporters or what Hurley terms 'gendermen' – a small number of men involved in gender work – who are feminised by their peers while also adopting protectionist tendencies in their

views towards female colleagues. This type of feminisation-based on othering tied to homophobia is even seen in some programmes that engage men and boys (Goicolea et al., 2014; Flood and Ertel, 2020).

Norms of political leadership are also changing in some contexts, with a shift towards forms that are often coded as 'feminine', as a result of the greater representation of women in politics and elsewhere. In their analysis of the Swedish Parliament, Erikson and Josefsson (2023) found that many Members of Parliament (MPs) associate good leadership traits with qualities that are coded as feminine, such as listening or inclusion. The authors argue that in an institutional context where there has been near gender parity for some time, political leadership norms may not disadvantage women to the extent often presumed. In addition, there are now electoral quotas of some kind in over 100 countries. These are electoral reforms that are usually proposed by men politicians. It is important, therefore, to question how men in politics might be responding to their perceived changes in society and adopting feminist or gender equality agendas as a result.

Feminist critical actors and gender norms in institutions

As a result of the historical focus on women's political 'under-representation', the main focus for the gender equality agenda in politics has often been on their increasing numerical representation. Less attention has been paid to the feminist politics of women and men who enter positions of political power. The 'critical actors' concept responds to the findings that women's increased presence in positions of power, such as legislative bodies or state executive, does not automatically lead to gender-equitable outcomes, and there is a need for closer interrogation of political programmes, parties and institutional factors (Celis and Childs, 2012). This does not negate the fact, however, that women politicians tend, on the whole, to represent women's issues and interests more than men politicians. The 'critical actors' approach has, therefore, enabled the recognition that various stakeholders can pursue gender equality and feminist interests.

Critical actors, for example, include femocrats: bureaucrats, who serve functions as internal feminist supporters and enablers within state institutions (Ansorg and Haastrup, 2018; Goetz, 2020; Nazneen and Okech, 2021; Araujo, 2021). It can also include men MPs (Höhmann, 2020). For example, Höhmann and Nugent (2022), find that in the British Parliament, male MPs tend to support women-authored policy statements when they need to gain female voters in the context of electoral competition. This means they represent interests strategically because it gives them 'extra leeway' that is not afforded to women MPs, who are expected to represent women's interest. This is also the case in Sweden, where Bergqvist et al. (2016) find that the leeway men politicians experience, unlike that experienced by women, means they do not face the pressure to pursue a gender equality agenda, yet reap the benefits if they do.

Similarly, a study by Dharmapuri and Shoemaker (2017) with US military leaders involved in the Women, Peace, and Security agenda finds that men gender-equality champions within the military have the potential to mainstream gender issues more effectively because of their male privilege, as their messages are more accepted within the institution. This tendency towards the depoliticisation and hollowing out of feminist ideals is the main concern with the growing number of men in politics who are self-proclaimed feminists.

Despite some changes that individual men or women in politics have enabled as critical actors or collectives, it must be recognised that the political institutions in which they operate have been imbued by gender norms, which are slow to change and continue to facilitate male domination and men's overrepresentation in politics (Murray, 2014; Galea and Gaweda, 2018; Lowndes, 2020). The unequal norms and formal, as well as informal, rules in political institutions limit women's political power, as so-called feminist institutionalist scholarship reveals (see for example Madsen,2021; Sawer et al., 2023; Kenny, 2023). Such research has demonstrated, for example, how women are

discriminated against and disadvantaged by practices that make political office incompatible with parenting and motherhood. These gendered rules, which affect women more than men, include parliamentary rules that do now allow people to bring children to chambers; the lack of nurseries, crèches facilities or parental leave for MPs; the inability to vote online or through a delegate; and holding sessions at late hours.

Similarly, networks and other forms of social and political capital – key resources for political power – are more accessible to men. Candidate recruitment by political parties, for example, is often claimed to be gender neutral, but relies on trust and level of ease of working (homosocial capital). For many, this entails a level of sexism (Bjarnegård, 2018; Piscopo and Kenny, 2020), or is based on assumptions that voters look for qualities in leaders that are predominantly associated with men (see for example ALIGN (2023) reports on gender norms in local politics in Nepal, Nigeria, Peru and Zimbabwe). While the literature and scholarship frame these issues as practices that disadvantage women, they are also institutional mechanisms that fit the behaviours, roles and expectations of men.

Allyship and accountability

Allyship is another and arguably even more prominent concept that captures men's engagement – as members of the privileged or powerful group – in gender equality change (Carlson et al., 2020; Radke et al., 2020; Halvorsen, 2023). Drury and Kaiser define an ally as someone who 'aligns with a disadvantaged group by recognizing the need for further progress in the fight for equal rights. Allies work alongside a disadvantaged group in the search for justice' (2014: 637). Wolfman (2023) highlights that men are often under suspicion in gender transformative work because the structural nature of patriarchy means men – by virtue of being men – benefit from the system and are, therefore, complicit in upholding it.

The interests of allies in pursuing social justice causes, including, for example, white people in racial justice movements such as Black Lives Matter, are linked to self-reflection and awareness. These are, in turn, tied to motivations such as personal experiences of various forms of injustice, personal connections to people who have experienced injustice or the encouragement of close connections to take up an issue (Casey, 2010; Wiley et al., 2021; Wells et al., 2024). However, male allyship for feminism and other gender equality causes has been relatively under-researched in comparison to other forms of socio-political difference, such as race.

The importance of male allies lies with their greater resonance with other men and, therefore, their ability to bring them into pro-equality action, including within political parties and other institutions. For example, men have a higher level of acceptance for male action than for action by women, because men are perceived as not having a stake in gender equality, which increases the legitimacy of their action in the eyes of other dominant groups.

Similarly, some studies find that positive portrayals of feminists – and men in particular – has a positive impact on the sympathies of other men and, potentially, on activism for gender equality and feminism (Wiley et al., 2013; Redford et al., 2018; Vázquez et al., 2021). Nonetheless, the impact of so-called 'in-group' allies is not automatic or always positive (Kutlaca et al., 2020) and can be mediated or eradicated by other factors, such as political party affiliation (Hartwich et al., 2023). It is important, therefore, to question under which circumstances men's claim of feminism or gender equality can support the dismantling of negative perceptions of feminisms.

Male allies' motivations for collective action may be rooted in empathy. However, the pathway to action is shaped by factors such as their level of awareness of sexism, but more importantly, the cost they would incur by taking action. As noted, this cost tends to be smaller for men than it is for women (Subašić et al., 2018). However, as a result of intersecting systems of power and oppression, these

costs vary amongst men and shape the types of action they undertake – be it action within the socially accepted norms or action that transgresses them, and is potentially more transformative (Kutlaca and Radke, 2023). In addition, the potential gains for some men may be larger for less action. For example, men can gain more social capital for doing a bit more housework or taking on more childcare than women who are expected to do such work all the time.

Many men (ally) groups and activists motivate men's engagement by highlighting the harmful impact of patriarchal masculine norms on men themselves, including some members of the global MenEngage Alliance, WhiteRibbon or Equimundo, or national-level organisations such as Beyond Equality (UK) or NextGen Men (Canada). This argument can sit alongside a broader intersectional analysis of patriarchal harms. Patriarchal harms to men are demonstrated, for example, in high levels of suicide among men, or their higher prevalence of harmful behaviours, such as risk taking and drug abuse, in response to an inability to meet the expectations of what it means to be a man. In other words, these organisations highlight the stakes that men have in uprooting patriarchy for their own benefit, as well as the benefits of more sustainable and effective change for women and all other people (Moss-Racusin et al., 2010). Many of them highlight, for example, the importance of avoiding alienating language that depicts all men as perpetrators, problems, or as toxic[3] in order to increase male allyship and transformative work on masculinities (Casey, 2010; Wells et al., 2024).

Some men and groups choose to use a 'pro-feminist' designation to highlight their differentiated experiences and backgrounds when entering feminist discourses from those of women (Mutunga, 2009; Chiweshe, 2018; Flood and Ertel, 2020; Maricourt and Burrell, 2022). Many groups working on gender equality, however, argue for close collaboration with feminist, LGBTQI+, and women's rights movements. For example, MenEngage Alliance does this through an accountability framework that spells out core principles, a code of conduct and accountability standards (MenEngage Alliance 2023; no date). Others view work on masculinities as detached from the gender equality work of some feminists (Ashe, 2011).

The potential negative impacts on the disadvantaged groups range from the demotivation of those experiencing injustice to psychological harm, especially if the allyship is merely performative. As Box 2 highlights, proving and actively living allyship through action, is a key expectation for genuine allyship, particularly as some people who claim allyship are motivated by personal gain through increased branding and self-aggrandizement (Vázquez et al., 2021; Wiley et al., 2021; Halvorsen, 2023; Kutlaca and Radke, 2023). Allyship is, therefore, disputed and in some cases rejected as an effective means of the engagement of a dominant group in justice and equality issues. These tensions and concerns are exacerbated in the context of the allyship of men politicians, as politicians vie for electoral support and build their personal appeal among voters.

Box 2: Eight themes of allyship adopted from Carlson et al. (2020)

1. Everyday action: proving allyship and moving beyond performing

2. Considering structural issues rather than individual acts

3. Self-reflection that leads to change and action

4. Amplifying marginalised voices without stealing the spotlight and being a 'saviour'

5. Seeking out criticism and being accountable by listening and asking

6. Learning by listening, not talking, and reading

7. Recognising the use of the ally label does not make one an ally

8. Questioning whether true allyship is even possible.

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3 In this report the authors refrain from using the term 'toxic masculinities' and only use it if specifically referenced by research participants or other sources. Instead, they describe hegemonic masculinity as patriarchal or inequitable. They draw on studies and experience of practitioners who find the terminology can disincentivise men from engaging in productive reflections and transformative work on masculinities.

Accountability is a key mechanism to avoid some of the pitfalls encountered by male allies and those promoting male engagement in gender equality. These include, for example, protectionist tendencies (sometimes with colonial racist overtones) or the overshadowing of the women's empowerment agenda by usurping the focus of feminist organising and drawing attention to the negative impacts of gender inequalities on men. In other words, there is a keen recognition that allies can cause harm by reproducing structures of oppression (Hurley, 2018; Myrttinen, 2019; Carlson et al., 2020; Flood and Ertel, 2020; Luyt and Starck, 2020).

A number of resources have been developed to support men to be more 'pro' or supportive of the feminist movement in various ways. For example, *The Guy's Guide to Feminism* (Kaufman and Kimmel, 2017) offers what is described as the definitive manual for building a 'powerful male ally' in the 21st century, while *Father Figure: How to Be a Feminist Dad* (Shapiro, 2021) suggests gender norms are shifting, and that modes of fatherhood should shift further to align more closely with feminist principles.

To the authors' knowledge, however, there are no guides or toolkits to help men politicians to better align their politics to feminist principles and objectives; yet some initiatives such as Men, Power and Politics, seek to work with men in politics as transformative agents of gender-equitable change (Hubbard and Greig, 2020). These efforts sit alongside campaigns such as HeforShe (UN Women, no date) which have, however, uneven reach and influence as demonstrated in this study, and are criticised by some feminist and ally groups.

Lastly, it must be underscored that even some of the men who take on an active role in gender equality or commit to feminist ideals, similarly to women, do not automatically identify with the feminist movements and adopt a feminist identity. It is important, therefore, to look beyond those men who identify as feminist in order to ensure that more allies are mobilised towards gender equality. Indeed, some studies show that men's hesitation to engage with gender equality work is because of its connection to feminism and their frequent misunderstanding and misinterpretation of feminist objectives, such as a belief that the goal is women's domination over men, rather than equality and justice (Casey, 2010; Goicolea et al., 2014; Redford et al., 2018).

Gendered performances: another pathway to changing politics

> Men in politics are rewarded for performing masculinity and discouraged from displaying traits associated with femininity. Men who cannot perform the required type of masculinity are censured for their failure to meet both gendered and political norms.
> (Murray and Bjarnegård, 2023: 4)

In his reflection on the field of political masculinities, Messerschmidt critiques the lack of consideration of embodied practices and their direct connection to one's politics (2023). This means that many analyses of the contributions of men politicians to gender equality, other than the focus on the hypermasculinity and patriarchal politics of leaders such as Trump, Putin, Bolsonaro or Erdoğan, do not consider how gendered performances and acts are still a form of representation of certain politics on gender equality. Therefore, feminist scholars have often paid limited attention to addressing alternative, non-hegemonic masculinities (Murray and Bjarnegård, 2023).

Gender-embodied performances are a well-established field of feminist analysis with regards to women's political participation (Lombardo and Meier, 2017; Rai, 2017; Meier and Severs, 2018). This scholarship builds on both the theorisation of gender as performative (Butler, 2006) and a Foucauldian conceptualisation of discursive power (Smith, 2016).

The enactment of gender by men politicians is an important consideration in understanding how norms are maintained or changed. For example, Moss-Racusin et al. (2010) show that atypical men leaders, meaning those who transgress the expected behaviours such as boasting about their individual achievements, can face punishments and backlash for demonstrating qualities coded as feminine. This discourages non-hegemonic, equitable behaviours amongst politicians who fear negative repercussions from voters or peers.

The specifics of what behaviours are within and outside the norm are context specific, as mentioned earlier. In the context of politics, however, they are shaped by the political institutions, whether the state operates under feminist or patriarchal values, or whether there are high levels of gender-based violence (GBV), all of which influence how masculinities are perceived and hierarchised (Flood and Ertel, 2020).

Such investigations included for example comparatives studies of Turkish President Erdoğan and Kurdish opposition leader Selahattin Demirta (Ozbay and Soybakis, 2020), US President Barack Obama and Russian president Vladimir Putin (Smith, 2016), Canadian Prime Minister Trudeau and his counterparts in the run up to the 2015 elections (Sabin and Kirkup, 2019), and Dutch male leaders of right-wing populist parties (Linders et al., 2022). As citizens resist and challenge politicians' gendered claims about them, not least through voting, the gender performances of alternative (feminist or other non-hegemonic) masculinities can carry a political cost for men in politics.

Attacks and backlash to feminism and gender equality politics

The growing attacks on gender equality, women's rights and feminism is creating an important national and global context that the men political leaders in this study must navigate. Certain types of backlash have emerged in response to the gains made by feminists, not least through United Nation (UN) bodies and global UN conferences in the 1980s and 1990s, and include calls for their reversal or at least the preservation of the status quo (Kretschmer and Meyer, 2013; McRobbie, 2016; Messner, 2016; Goetz, 2020). However, the opposition to feminism and gender equality is not always a reaction to specific feminist gains. In this case, it does not constitute a backlash as much as the deliberate targeting of women, feminists and LGBTQI+ communities.

Many critics of feminism and gender equality are men from across the socio-economic spectrum who perceive a loss of their privilege (Messner, 2016; Flood and Ertel, 2020; Eslen-Ziya and Bjørnholt, 2022). In the worst-case scenarios, this resistance has led to deadly violence by, for example, so-called 'incels' (involuntary celibates) who perceive feminism as the cause of the weakening of men and societies at large (Copland, 2023). Such views coalesce round men such as Andrew Tate, a self-proclaimed anti-feminist influencer (Sayogie et al., 2023), and Jordan Peterson ('feminism is a failed ideology'), who promote specific types of harmful masculinity. While much of the focus to date has been on the negative impacts on the rights of women, it must be recognised that men who transgress hegemonic masculinities that correspond with the expected femininities are implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, targeted (Moss-Racusin et al., 2010; Wiley et al., 2013).

'Gender ideology' is a key discursive strategy and concept used by anti-gender and anti-feminist actors, by which they seek to misrepresent feminist, LGBTQI+ and gender equality activism and scholarship (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017; Graff and Korolczuk, 2022; McEwen and Narayanaswamy, 2023). Through gender ideology, gender serves the function of a 'glue', as Grzebalska et al. (2017) put it, to hold together attacks on various minorities, including Muslims and migrants from the Global South, LGBTQI+ people and indigenous populations. The use of gender ideology is, therefore, a totalitarian political project that aims to silence and victimise its opponents (Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018; Corredor, 2019).

The key players in the global anti-gender movement include the Catholic church, various forms of evangelical Christian religious groups, as well as the Russian Orthodox church and Muslim organisations (Edström et al., 2016; Datta, 2021; Shameem, 2021; Khan et al., 2023). They also include governments, as witnessed for example by the group of states at the UN called 'friends of the family' (Government of Belarus, 2015).

One often cited example is the International Organization for the Family (IOF) which circulates its financial resources, strategies and ideologies and feeds anti-gender and anti-feminist activism in countries like Nigeria and Hungary through its World Congress of Families and other activities. While anti-feminist and anti-gender equality activism have close links to men political leaders (Maricourt and Burrell, 2022), women also play a leading and visible role in political parties and movements that attack feminism and the concept of gender, often as part of the wider anti-liberal agenda (Kretschmer and Meyer, 2013).

These movements often rely on a so-called 'pro-family' agenda (Edström et al., 2023). They claim to be fighting for the protection of the 'natural family' and the gendered roles that are attached to it, with a particular focus on women's responsibilities for mothering and caring. They use arguments, therefore, that are rooted in heteronormative family and sex-based differentiations of roles and child protection. Radical right-wing populists in Europe, North America and several middle-income countries like India, Brazil (Bohn, 2022), and Turkey (Eslen-Ziya and Bjørnholt, 2022) have used these long-term, gender-based fears to drive the push back on women's rights. This has been the case, in particular, since the global COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated long-term austerity measures in many countries around the world and had a significant impact on masculinities and gender relations (Wojnicka, 2021).

Summary and implications for research design

Men in politics can adopt various strategies and actions to contribute towards gender equality in politics, including through various forms of policy actions or gender performances. As summarised in Box 3, these strategies and actions are separate and at times incongruent or contradictory, but they shape one another in the eyes of the citizens and voters, as well as other politicians (women and men) and influence people's views of masculine norms in politics and society at large.

Box 3: Actions and strategies that can be used by men politicians to enable gender equality

- Challenging sexism in politics and society, such as derogatory statements about women in politics

- Role modelling equitable masculinities in politics and private lives through statements and actions that challenge patriarchal norms

- Embracing feminist or pro-feminist identities in their public discourse

- Appointing women to leadership roles and other positions of power

- Supporting gender quota legislation to increase the number of women in politics

- Working with feminist/women's rights organisations on issues such as gender-based violence (GBV) or economic empowerment.

The actions taken by men politicians as allies or feminist political representatives or femocratic civil servants towards gender equality are further shaped by their personal, institutional and social context, which can create barriers to change. Some of the barriers identified in the literature are summarised in Box 4.

> **Box 4: Barriers to the engagement of men politicians in gender equality**
>
> - Peer pressure from predominantly men (and some women) politicians, voters and media who subscribe to hegemonic masculinity norms
>
> - A desire to maintain power
>
> - Institutional gender norms
>
> - Backlash to the transformation of traditional gender roles and masculine norms from religious and other socially conservative actors
>
> - Myths and stereotypes about feminism and gender as a (solely) women's issue
>
> - Personal attacks on politicians' masculinity, tied to sexual orientation in particular.

Based on these theories and scholarship, the project team formulated the following three assumptions about men politicians and their perceived influence:

1. Men politicians support gender equality and perform gender-focused political masculinities based on the belief that prospective voters support such masculinities. Their decision is shaped by national and global discourses and political institutions, such as peer groups and political parties.

2. Men politicians who support gender equality, especially as feminists or allies, adopt a different and more equitable type of political masculinity, which in some instances they articulate and perform in contrast to the hegemonic masculinity of other leaders globally and locally.

3. Men politicians who adopt feminist or gender equality politics influence the views and expectations of acceptable masculinities held by voters and other key political stakeholders, such as activists or women politicians.

These assumptions formed the basis of the research questions and objectives, discussed in the following section.

Research objectives and methodology

This research project asked three main research questions about men in politics:

- How do men politicians who work on and speak about gender equality issues understand and communicate their politics with regards to feminism?

- How do gender norms and other factors shape the way in which these men enact their gender agenda and the type of masculinities they demonstrate in the political sphere?

- How do women in politics, activists and students perceive the activities of men in politics who engage with the gender equality agenda, and do they see any changes in gender norms and masculinities as a result?

These questions focus on the socio-political conditions through which men in politics engage with gender equality and women's rights and, therefore, on what civil society and governments ought to consider to amplify this engagement and any resulting changes, with a particular focus on their connection to feminism.

Comparative approach and country case selection

The research adopted an in-depth country-level approach, which allowed for a detailed mapping of the historical changes of gender norms and their interplay with politics. The three countries selected, Colombia, Liberia and Malaysia, represent a convenient sample of diverse countries where men politicians discussed feminist foreign policy (FFP), including the presidents and minister of foreign affairs, and have, therefore, demonstrated the presence of gender equality discourses in the country with a specific relationship to feminism.

Other criteria for country selection included focus on less-researched geographies, as well as a diversity of social, political, and economic conditions that could affect the motivations, views, performances and impact of men politicians on gender norms. These different conditions include: political systems and cultures; democratic governance; socio-economic inequalities; feminist movements and activism; women's political representation; gender (in)equalities; and global political economic standings. For brief country profiles see Annex 1 (for in-depth information, see the three country reports).

The country selection was reinforced by further consultation with feminist organisations and other civil society actors and researchers in the three countries to ensure the research was locally relevant and of interest to fill existing gaps and meet the needs of actors working on gender equality.

The project adopted a qualitative methodology focused on collecting data that enabled analysis and responses to each of the three project research questions. This entailed, first, the conduct of key informant interviews (KIIs) with men and women politicians and gender equality/feminist activists, some of whom were also academics or journalists. The KIIs covered a combination of the politicians' personal history narratives and descriptions of their journey into politics and into gender equality work and feminism. The interviews also focused on their assessment of the political culture, their gendered experiences of politics and their overall views of the socio-political situation of their country, including the quality of democratic representation, the role of civil society and movements and key cultural debates. The research did not, however, examine or asses the gender work carried out by the participants. Instead, it focused on their motivations and justifications, and overall discourses about their actions on gender equality.

Second, focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with young people at university to understand how, if at all, men in politics are perceived to shape masculinities and norms within politics and society more broadly. In this way, the project recognised the dialectical relationship between politicians and citizens, and the co-construction of gender norms within mainstream politics. Indeed, the university students were selected because of their importance for the democratic future of their countries, as well as the impact that role models can have on the gender norm perceptions of this age group.

A qualitative research methodology was adopted to allow participants to articulate intersectional gendered identities and expectations in terms that were locally relevant. In this way, the project methodology avoided the possible imposition of seemingly universal analytical categories of difference such as race, class, age or sexuality. These categories may or may not be relevant or similarly understood across different contexts, and while many researchers assume their universality, they have various manifestations and resonances (Ford and Lyons, 2012).

Consequently, after the project team co-produced a number of central resources (such as interview and focus group consent forms and topic guides), the three partner organisations had significant autonomy to identify the key informants that would have the greatest impact and utility within their particular context, while maintaining key shared characteristics to ensure cross-country comparability. The research instruments and designs were reviewed by the ODI ethics board and by each of the partners' academic institutional review boards to ensure safe and ethical processes were in place. All local ethical and safeguarding processes were followed throughout this study. Ethics were discussed at every project meeting, and no ethical issues were reported during the data collection and analysis processes.

Throughout this project, the principle of co-design was upheld (Zamenopoulos and Alexiou, 2018). The principle of co-production was adopted in order to foster collegiate and non-hierarchical relationships across the project teams, all of whom made significant contributions to all aspects of this project, including the project methodology. It extended, therefore, beyond the core project team, with project research assistants encouraged to contribute and critique aspects of the methodology and data analysis as they were developed. Such principles came together in the project partnership charter that was discussed at regular meetings. However, it must be acknowledged that power hierarchies persisted due to the sub-granting relationship between ODI/ALIGN and the research partners in each country.

The following sections outline the research participants and methods. For detailed descriptions of, for example, participants' demographic and political profiles, see the individual country reports.

Key informant interviews

In total, the project teams conducted 26 KIIs with men politicians, most of whom are in, or had been in, or were vying for, an elected office. There were two reasons for this emphasis on officials elected to office by their constituents/citizens. First, the power and influence they wield. Second, and more importantly, their dependency on public perceptions, which are shaped by, among other factors, their gender performances. This dependency is not universal, but is influenced by the extent – or lack – of democratic openness and competition. A similar approach was used by Trimble et al. (2015) who evaluated the media coverage of Canadian national political parties. In (semi-)autocratic states, for example, politicians are less dependent on public approval and electoral votes. In many (pseudo-)democracies, however, elected officials are more likely to follow the gender norms that are expected and demanded by their constituency or the wider electorate. Their masculinities are, therefore, connected to broader norm regimes in their countries.

The men politicians were selected for this study on the basis of their public statements and self-identification as being interested in gender equality or a women's rights agenda, or were approached by the research teams because of their track record, such as voting for specific legislation or being members of a government or party that adopted policies to improve some aspects of women's lives. The objective was not to assess the politicians' adherence to feminist or gender equality values or ideals, and the selection of potential key informants was not, therefore, tied to a specific proxy or variable representing a feminist value or policy. Instead, the research focused on the normative causes and impacts of the feminist label on political masculinities. The politicians were identified by researchers and partners and, through the use of a snow-balling method, were asked to recommend other men to participate.

The KIIs also included 26 interviews with journalists, activists and academics, along with some women politicians in each country. These interviews enabled the triangulation of the data about men politicians and shed further light on the perceptions of politicians' masculinities as situated within the broader political system and gendered expectations of political leaders, as well as feminist and anti-feminist/gender politics in each country, including the role of civil society and role models. These KIIs and the FGDs (discussed below) did not focus specifically on the men politicians who participated in the research.

While the project has focused on the commitment and realities of selected men politicians, it situates individual men and women within the wider social context in their countries, and does not detract, therefore, from the contributions and leadership of other actors, in particular the feminist movements within each country. There is a well-documented danger of spotlighting individual men in masculinity research and programming as being exceptional for their equitable attitudes and behaviours. Therefore, individual men are not profiled in the report and the research focuses on the structural issues that underpin their rise.

Focus group discussions

The 18 FGDs conducted for this study were designed to capture the perceptions of prominent men politicians with a commitment to gender equality, amongst 'ordinary citizens'. Each project team undertook six focus groups lasting around 90 minutes each. Participants were recruited from amongst the students of their university campuses, partner campuses, and programmes or interventions, which included for example LGBTQI+ activists in Colombia. Some FGDs were gender segregated (based on self-selection by the participants), which was decided based on cultural norms in each country. Other identity markers that were considered in the selection and captured are age, education, and location (rural-urban spectrum). The participants' political preferences and level of political efficacy/engagement were also captured in order to answer the research questions about the importance of socio-political context on political masculinities.

Overview of project data

The following data on the 52 KIIs and 18 FGDs were collected across the three project partners, as summarised in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1: Key informant interviews: number of participants

Interviewee group	Colombia	Liberia	Malaysia	Total
Men in politics	7	10	9	26
Women in politics	3	1	5	9
Journalists, activists and academics	6	4	7	17
Total	16	15	21	52

Table 2: Focus groups: number of participants

Groups	Colombia	Liberia	Malaysia	Total
Student groups	23	36	37	96
Activist groups	12	12	0	24
Total	35	48	37	120

Data management processing and analysis

A project data management plan was developed to ensure data security and integrity at all stages of the project, given the sensitive nature of the political debates for high profile politicians and activists. However, the public profile of participants also made the anonymisation challenging because of their quite unique and identifiable characteristics (such as being a politician). An anonymisation protocol was designed, therefore, that drew on the available literature (Berkhout, 2013; Ellersgaard et al., 2022; Harenberg et al., 2022), to mitigate the challenges around anonymisation as far as possible. In particular, this led to changes in this study's approach to the consent process, with men and women politicians asked during the consent process if they wanted any quotes attributed to them to be anonymised in any project outputs.

All of the qualitative data were transcribed professionally and verbatim, and in some instances translated into English, where this was required. Subsequently, the data were coded and sorted into a pre-determined codebook that was developed by the project team. The codes for analysis were developed on the basis of existing theories of gender norms in politics and through inductive analysis of the materials, meaning by reading transcripts and identifying new relevant analytical codes.

Limitations

The main methodological limitation is the relatively small-scale qualitative nature of this study – the result, in part, of its niche focus on a small group of men in politics who are working on the feminist and gender equality agenda. With only 26 interviews with men politicians and 18 focus group discussions with specific sets of citizens, the project cannot provide fully representative insights into men politicians and their constituents' views of them.

There are also some biases and omissions within the interviewee sample, as the participants were recruited through the researchers' networks and snowballing, resulting, for example, in the homogeneity of focus group participants in Colombia or the lack of insights from current opposition parties in Malaysia. Future studies should expand on this research to engage with additional stakeholders, such as young people outside of higher education.

Nevertheless, all three country reports and this cross-cutting report fully account for such limitations, and embrace the rich insights enabled by such in-depth and narrowly focused studies. A body of literature explores the benefits of small-scale studies such as this, and within its time and budgetary constraints, this study has collected sufficient data to enable an engaging and unique analysis around political masculinities and gender equality.

The study does not examine gender norms and other elements of political parties and other political institutions in detail. As a result, this report does not provide recommendations for changes in political institutions, which are crucial for a broader gender equality agenda in politics and beyond. This analytical lens was outside the scope of this study because of elections in each of the countries around the time of data collection, as well as the diverse histories and conceptualisations that underpin political parties in each country. For example, 'left' or 'right' wing parties, as understood in Colombia, do not resonate within Malaysia or Liberia. Therefore, while political ideology influences how political masculinities and gender equality interact (Harnois, 2017), this research is unable to speak of the influence of political ideology on political masculinities comparatively across the three country studies.

Other challenges included access to men politicians, made particularly difficult by the aforementioned elections. In addition, data from Colombia and Malaysia were collected in Spanish and Malay and translated. While great care was taken throughout the translation process, some of the nuance in the discussions around feminism and gender may have been lost or mis-translated, with the potential to cause some issues for the subsequent analysis. Key terms, for example, such as 'gender' are foreign in the everyday language in Malaysia, which made the translation and cross-country conceptual alignment incomplete. Similarly, language limitations shaped the theoretical and literature underpinnings of this study, which is rooted in resources available in English.

Finally, while 'political masculinities' is the underpinning theorisation used within this study, this theory remains relatively limited as an analytical framework, and male allyship literature offered more relevant insights into the participants' experiences and attitudes. There are very few studies in the three project countries that have used theories of political masculinity explicitly, and this, to some extent, makes it challenging to situate and contextualise this study theoretically. Despite this, the data and analysis across this study are, as a result, relatively unique, and it is hoped this project will lead to further research on political masculinities in the project countries and more widely across the Global South.

ALiGN

Findings

Refusing feminist identity in favour of allyship and advocacy

While the research focused on men politicians who identify with and promote a gender equality agenda, almost all of these men (with the exception of one politician in Liberia and one other in Malaysia) refused to label themselves as feminist in their public-facing communication. This section summarises two interrelated findings connected to this refusal of the feminist label and identity.

First, it outlines reasons for the refusal, which ranged across a spectrum between *caution* and *rejection*. Despite the overwhelming refusal, certain sub-groups of men politicians were more likely to embrace feminism, be it in the form of pro-feminist allyship identity and rhetoric, or as silent sympathisers.

Second, it summarise the preferred alternative socio-political identities of these men politicians: *allies*, *advocates* and *HeForShes*, to name a few. These alternatives allow some politicians to benefit from being associated with 'progressive' values and the moral appeals of the public, while for others it limits their exposure to both pro- and anti-feminist backlash and criticism.

Refusal to be a feminist: an unwanted label and socio-political identity

> When it comes to the term 'feminist,' its connotation, and the meaning of feminism might be perceived as overly radical and overpowering toward men. Many progressive individuals now hesitate to self-identify as feminists due to concerns about association with radical elements.
> Male politician, Malaysia (quoted in Azmi et al., 2024: 25)

This refusal of the feminist label is driven by reasons that are spread across a spectrum, (see Figure 2), ranging from a seemingly positive respect for women's leadership in feminist activism to negative and harmful visions of the gender equality agenda. These reasons can be understood as political calculations and choices based on an evaluation of the potential political costs and benefits. These include, for example, the ability to gain votes and political capital, or to incur possible penalties for standing outside of the political norms by associating with the predominantly negative stereotypes attached to feminists as a political and social group. Within this context, feminists are often seen as advocating for gender equality, which some understand as militant, men-hating or promoting the erasure of 'natural' sex-based differences between men and women. Such negative stereotypes are shaped significantly by social media influencers such as Andrew Tate (Koester and Marcus, 2024).

A seemingly sensitive and 'aware' reason to refuse the feminist label was a desire to avoid co-opting or appropriating the feminist agenda from women and women's organisations. Research participants with these views recognise women's historical activism and leadership as well as male privilege and men's late entry into mainstream efforts for gender equality. This was mostly the case for politicians in Colombia, where feminist movements and pro-feminist organisations have successfully mainstreamed gender equality and feminist discourses into societal debates and made masculinities into a political subject matter.

Figure 2: Continuum of reasons for refusing feminist political label

Source: Authors, based on country reports

The caution of men politicians is also tied to potential critiques by feminist movements for not being good enough feminists or living up to feminist principles. Being held accountable by civil society can have negative political consequences, and it might, therefore, be easier to avoid this label, particularly in contexts where feminists have societal influence, such as Colombia (perhaps less so in Liberia and Malaysia). The seemingly positive concern about not 'stepping on feminists' toes' can, therefore, be a feigned respect in some cases: an easy way to evade responsibility to act. Arguments that women are 'better placed' to lead on feminist and gender equality issues enables men in politics to claim that it is better for them to take a supportive role and refuse to claim feminist identities or actions.

Another aspect of a cautious refusal is the desire to avoid backlash and appeal to more conservative or traditional voters. While the word 'fear' is not used explicitly by any of the respondents, many who prefer to use the alternative identities, discussed below, raise considerations about the perceptions of the term feminism by citizens or movements that align with patriarchal views about gender norms and roles. The relevance of this fear varies across countries and individuals, depending on the perceived strength of patriarchal norms in the country, but it is also shaped by the levels of social and economic capital that the individual politicians have. This, in turn, affects the risks they are willing or able to take.

In Malaysia primarily, and in a few cases in Liberia, some men refused the label because they rejected what they understand feminism to be, yet still endorse the view that women face inequalities. Their understanding is often based on myths, stereotypes or a lack of actual knowledge about feminist values. These false narratives include understanding feminist demands and histories as a Western imposition in opposition to local and religious value systems; or seeing feminism as a political project that calls for the superiority of women over men. Such views overlook the long histories of women-led organising – both within and outside the feminist political umbrella – in each of the countries, as well as Islamic feminist tradition.

Allies and advocates

> I am not going to be so bold as to describe myself as a feminist, a media feminist, but I have been an ally. Yes, I have been an ally, I have been committed to gender equality, and I believe that I have contributed, and I have transformed myself.
> Male politician, Colombia (quoted in Serrano Amaya and García Suarez, 2024: 23)

In all three countries, politicians attached themselves to the issues of gender equality and/or feminism in ways that resonated locally and that matched the level of caution they found acceptable, as described in the previous section. Some of the most common terms included: Allies ('aliado' in Colombia); (Women's rights/Gender equality) Advocates (all); Fighter for justice ('pejuang keadilan' in Malaysia); Humanists (Malaysia); Progressive (especially Liberia, but also Malaysia); HeForShes (especially Liberia, described in Box 5).

Box 5: HeForShe

The HeforShe campaign was launched by the United Nations in 2014, and focuses on male allyship in governance, education and the private sector. Some of its main critiques focus on the lack of substantive action from HeForShes and a focus on individual men rather than structural and systemic issues (Flood, 2017). Of the three country case studies, HeForShe is most prominent in Liberia, where it was launched in the post-war environment as a way to engage men and boys in ending sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). The term has become synonymous with men and boys who promote gender equality, have positive attitudes toward women's rights or who are considered feminists (Garnett et al., 2024).

For the majority of the men politicians, their decisions to be advocates or allies were underpinned by their understanding of gender equality as focused on women's rights and empowerment and were rooted in their appreciation for women's experiences of injustices and discrimination. Some men came to gender equality work from other intersectional social justice struggles they had experienced directly. These include, for example, politicians who represent or are part of the LGBTQI+ community in Colombia.

While some men positioned themselves as human rights, humanist or social justice proponents and conceptualised their support for gender equality through these broader struggles, they did not make direct links between their lived experiences of injustices and their work in this area. This speaks to another finding: that the politicians in this study rarely discussed their own masculinities or considered or discussed themselves as performing particular types of political and other masculinities.

While all men politicians were selected for their pro- gender equality stands, several respondents highlighted their unease with ideas of gender and, therefore, expressed their stance through the prism of women's equality. As discussed later in this report, these men understood gender-related discourses and policies as a Western concept and some of them considered gender to be a code word for gender diversity and LGBTQI+ people.

None of the men identified a desire to change patriarchal masculinities for the benefit of men and boys as a primary driver of their pro-feminist/gender equality commitment. They were not motivated by harmful masculinities and political norms and, in contrast to the study's assumption, did not consider their role model effect or their gender performances explicitly. Significantly, they recognised their privilege and therefore their responsibility to act and potentially to mobilise others, but the majority did not move beyond this level of self-reflective analysis towards action, let alone a more intersectional analysis of masculinities in their countries. The exceptions were openly gay politicians in Colombia, who interrogated their own positionality and privilege and were more informed by the discourse of gendered power differences.

This combination of a focus on women and a lack of any critical reflection of masculinities creates both a connection and a complementarity. This allows most men in politics to recognise that their gender and political positions give them access to power to influence change and sits well with their ideas of moral responsibility. At the same time, it allows them to maintain and act within a relatively comfortable patriarchal, gender, cis and heteronormative framework. It enables them to be seen as

the 'right level' of progressive, 'modern' leaders and/or protectors of women, yet they can exercise these norms in a way that is not perceived as being too traditional, conservative and harmful, but as updated, modern or more progressive, echoing the exploitation of a gendered leeway as suggested by Bergkvist et al. (2016).

Supporting women without transforming masculine gender norms

> They [women] have rights, they should be given those rights. And it's not just about women demanding their rights. It's about the whole society recognising those rights because it's a demand not only specific to women, but a demand from society that requires women to be honoured.
>
> Male politician, Malaysia (quoted in Azmi et al., 2024: 27)

The enactment of the pro-equality or pro-feminist agenda by men politicians varied both within and across the three countries and can be grouped into four different types as captured in Figure 3. While the types could be seen as a continuum, politicians change their positions depending on the issue and time, and are not, therefore, static in their type of response. Consequently, those in this study cannot simply be associated with a specific type of pro-feminist agenda, given the fluidity within and between these typologies.

Figure 3: Types of feminist and allyship actions

Silent sympathisers	Shared values and empathy for women with no notable public action (mostly in Malaysia)
Occasional supporters	Occasional support for the intitiatives of others, particularly women (across all countries)
Proactive developers	Long term commitment and proposing their own initiatives and agendas on gender equality
Overall inequalities fighters	Mainstreaming gender inequality into other activities, such as development plans

Source: Authors, based on country reports

The focus on programmes and policies, rather than gender performances, can also be explained, in part, by demands from many members of the public (e.g. students, activists) for action that goes beyond words, as is discussed in the subsequent section in relation to a lack of trust in politicians.

Most of their actions centre explicitly on women while having an implicit impact on men – be it support for legislative changes, such as a quota bill in Liberia or a marital rape law and women's economic empowerment in Malaysia, or funding for programmes at the levels of local councils and communities. At the same time, this allows them to avoid topics that may be seen as politically risky. As such, there is a hierarchy of gender equality topics, as Serrano Amaya and García Suárez (2024) explain, in which trans rights, for example, are seen as too politically sensitive in Colombia to be tackled under the feminist or gender equality frame. Meanwhile, questions of GBV, for example, are more acceptable.

While the politicians recognize the patriarchal nature of their societies and of politics, they do not see it as their allyship task, nor did they list it as one of their achievements, to speak out against patriarchal norms in public. Many prominent cases of male violence against women – whether online or in the form of hate speech – were listed by women politicians, activists and students, which denotes the key effect of this harmful political environment on gender equality. Conversely, feminist activists and women politicians saw this inaction on overt misogyny and sexism as a weakness of the men allies, particularly in Malaysia.

Most of the participating men politicians do not conceptualise their politics as being primarily concerned with changing other men in politics or reflecting upon and transforming their own masculinities. Other than calling out peers for their inequitable and harmful actions, which was seen as the 'educating mission' of some politicians in Colombia, there were no considerations of other best practices of male allyship behaviour identified by masculinities practitioners (see, for example, Box 2).

Obstacles to, and enablers of, feminist and gender equality politics

This section outlines the factors that have shaped men's engagement with feminist politics and their decisions to pursue the gender equality agenda. Some of these were identified explicitly by the men themselves, for example, the patriarchal nature of politics was often listed as a barrier for their work in all three countries.

Other factors, however, were invisible to most of the men or were not understood by them as shaping the gender equality action they supported or undertook. These factors emerged from the cross-country comparison or were raised by activists and women politicians. They included, for example, the lack of engagement with feminist organisations, which resulted in a lack of understanding among some of the men politicians of intersectional gender inequalities.

The factors are organised into three sub-themes: personal, institutional, and societal factors (which include global influences). Each of the sub-themes intersects with the three analytical components shown in Figure 1, while global influences, such as UN conventions or global anti-gender networks, did not emerge as a standalone set of factors, but were more localised in each study country.

Personal factors: knowledge and connections

As noted in previous sections, some politicians refused a feminist label because of their misunderstanding of feminist histories and principles. In contrast, those men who came from civil society or academic backgrounds, including LGBTQI+ activism, or had engagements with it, were more inclined to support feminist causes and showed a greater understanding of gender equality, even if they still refused the feminist label. This suggests, therefore, that personal knowledge of feminism and gender equality, particularly through and with feminist and pro-feminist movements and organisations, is a key factor that shapes men's gender equality politics. It mirrors findings from other research that men's positive experience with feminists has a positive impact on their support for feminist causes, in contrast to engagement with other women in their lives who do not explicitly label themselves as feminist (Wiley et al., 2021).

This lack of knowledge about feminism was also often accompanied by a lack of understanding of gender inequalities, and in particular as intersectional systems of oppression and power. Across all three contexts, most of the politicians did not consider women (or men) in terms of their diversity or

the varied lived experiences of women based on their socio-economic class or race, among other factors. There has, therefore, been a high degree of homogenising.

It could be argued that some distinctions were made implicitly by the politicians' approach to specific gender equality issues. In the case of female genital mutilation (FGM) in Liberia, it was understood as a problem affecting women and girls in rural areas in particular, and seen as connected to issues around education, poverty, etc. In Colombia, ethnicity did not feature in the research, even though Indigenous and Black women are some of the most marginalised groups in the country, and whiteness is closely tied to political masculinities. However, as Serrano Amaya and García Suárez (2024) explain, this could be because nearly 86% of Colombians do not recognise themselves as belonging to any ethnicity, as well as the practice of dealing with ethnicity and gender issues separately.

Engagements with domestic feminist and women's rights actors, or organisations working on men and masculinities, can also help to explain why men politicians in Colombia, in particular, do not perceive feminism and gender equality work as a foreign intervention or imposition and are, therefore, less likely to reject it for being undesirable within the country context, as seen in Liberia and Malaysia. The political histories of the movements in each of the countries must be considered here: Malaysian feminists, for example, have been excluded historically from the political space, despite their contribution to pro-democratic activism and transitions. The post-conflict reconstructions in Colombia and Liberia, and the pro-gender equality international norms tied to the UN Women, Peace and Security agenda, have assisted feminists and women's organisations in both of these countries to gain some political access and recognition, a finding confirmed by relevant scholarship and research in the case of Colombia, but not Liberia (Cheeseman et al., 2017; Garrido Ortolá, 2020).

While international feminist and gender equality organisations and movements were highlighted as a positive and enabling factor for activists, the men politicians in Malaysia did not show any considerable engagement with gender equality actors, forums, conferences, conventions or policies. As discussed later in this report, global gender regimes were, for several of the politicians, seen as a liability within the context of Westernisation and neo-colonialism. At the same time, some politicians in Malaysia also highlighted a very different challenge: feeling unable to engage with the feminist movements because they perceive such movements with suspicion.

None of the politicians shared any explicit concerns about being accused of being seen to be too 'effeminate' when rejecting feminism. While in Colombia there was a more explicit derogation of the work of openly gay politicians on gender equality, the rejection of feminism was not, surprisingly, explained by the backlash against heteronormative gender norms in any of the countries.

Finally, one key factor that can explain the interest of politicians in gender equality in general and women's empowerment in particular, were the personal experiences of women in their lives or the lived examples of important figures, such as mothers, wives or children, who consolidated for them the importance of gender equality. This is in line with much of the previously mentioned allyship literature on the reasons why members of advantaged groups enter into allyship activism. It is unclear whether this means that men in politics without such connections to female figures are less likely to engage in gender equality work, or how many male leaders with such connections still choose not to engage in this work. However, it does suggest that creating such relationships and personal story-based learning can be a productive way to bring more men politicians into gender equality work.

Institutional factors: peers, parties and coalitions

> What is being done is just a warm water handkerchief: 'Yes, up with women, equality, equity'. That's all very well, but the problem is that politicians won't allow it to happen, because there is nothing better than money and power, and politics provides both.
> Male student, Colombia (quoted in Serrano Amaya and García Suarez, 2024: 39)

All men politicians, regardless of their political party affiliations or roles, spoke about the widespread patriarchal culture within politics as the major obstacle for their gender equality work. For some interviewees, this culture was manifested, for example, in the individual actions of their male peers, such as misogynist and sexist remarks in parliaments, as well as in the lack of women's representation or the denigration of gay politicians' interest in gender equality.

While most politicians described these practices as being part of 'political culture' or the 'nature of politics', the practices represent patriarchal norms within political institutions, not least homophobia and the dismissal of norms that are constructed as feminine. However, similarly to the rare instances of politicians' reflections of their own masculinity, patriarchal norms such as competitiveness and conflict (compared to consensual politics, which is coded as feminine) were not mentioned as part of the political culture by the men politicians interviewed.

Part of the patriarchal political culture in Malaysia was the previously mentioned strategy to refrain from challenging the misogynist actions of other men politicians openly and publicly. While this may be seen as a failure to enact feminist or equitable masculinities in politics, it can be understood as a type of bargaining that has been described by some women in politics as a form of strategic consensus or coalition building in response to institutional constraints. The rationale for such action is in line with the findings in some studies (e.g. Kutlaca et al., 2020) that when men as allies confront other men, this might be valued by women, but might be seen by men as over-reacting. It may be that men don't challenge other men because being seen as over-reacting could cost them political capital. Therefore, if men in politics who are pro-feminist and pro-gender equality want to build broader coalitions and networks for their gender equality agenda, as they need to in democratic politics, they may need to engage in strategic silencing on their agenda or deploy other compromising tactics.

This navigation of political systems is particularly crucial when gender equality is not seen as important by political parties or by the voting public, as is the case in Malaysia and Liberia. In Colombia, the socio-political context means that it has become 'politically correct' not to speak against gender equality, yet this issue is actively avoided by many men in politics or rejected using arguments that hide the true reasons. For example, gender equality issues are often dismissed in Colombia by claims that there is not enough funding. The costs of achieving gender equality are, therefore, constructed as a barrier that prevents activism by Colombian politicians.

Political culture and the role of male peers need to be understood within the context of political party structures. Despite the cross-party pervasiveness of patriarchal norms, some parties' political agendas have a positive influence on the ability of politicians to be proactive or outspoken in their allyship. In Colombia, for example, most of the research participants came from left/centre-left or green parties. In Malaysia, while recognising the limitation of recruiting participants from all political parties (see Azmi et al.,2024), none of the participants' political parties prioritise gender equality topics, while some parties, such as those associated with the Pakatan Harapan coalition or the Malaysian United Democratic Alliance (MUDA), are more progressive with their gender equality agendas. In the case of Liberia, political parties tend not to operate on a political ideology spectrum and, as a result, there was no clear consideration of what types of parties would be more enabling of feminist politicians as a result of their manifestos or priorities.

Very few politicians mentioned political party leaders as a factor in their allyship, despite the fact that the political will of high-ranking, powerful members and leaders of parties can shape gender equality practices and the political agenda of the parties from women's perspective (see for example ALIGN studies on local governance). This was the case in Malaysia, where women politicians highlighted the role these leaders played in supporting them.

Four types of political figures were, however, identified in the research by some of the participants. These actors were not necessarily the most prevalent, but can be seen as critical actors in terms of enabling men to become critical actors themselves. These four types offer potential entry points for supporting men in positions of power, as follow:

- Technical assistants of politicians in Colombia, whose knowledge and skills shaped how men politicians engaged with the gender equality agenda.

- Older/senior politicians who acted as mentors to a few respondents and motivated them to take up the gender equality agenda, particularly in Malaysia.

- 'Younger' (as understood in the local context, which could mean under 35 or 40) men politicians or new entrants into politics, who help to create a sense of growing critical mass or build networks of like-minded individuals.

- Women in politics – their representation (see Table 3 for an overview) shapes the normalisation of the gender equality agenda, and this enables some politicians to support their work. In the case of Liberia, for example, even though there is the lowest representation of women in Parliament in comparison to Colombia and Malaysia, the presidential leadership of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf has had a crucial impact. Even without reaching a critical mass, engagement with individuals was highlighted.

Table 3: Levels of women's representation

Indicator	Colombia	Liberia	Malaysia
% of women in national parliament	29.1% (2022)	11% (2024)	13.5% (2023)
% of voters registered in latest election that were women	54.1% (2023)	50% (2023)	50.4 % (2023)

Sources: Misión de Observación Electoral (MOE) (2022), Azmi (2023), National Elections Commission (2024), Mas Mujeres Democracia (no date).

Similarly to the findings on political orientations and policy priorities, there were no other clear patterns within the political parties that emerged across the three studies, including the presence of women's wings.

Political capital and experience also shape the engagement of politicians with the gender equality agenda, in addition to the personal factors already highlighted. Across the three countries, those with high levels of political capital (such as long-term, well established civil servants) and 'young' new entrants to politics seemed to be most outspoken and the most willing to take on the gender equality agenda. For the former group, their existing capital could enable them to withstand backlash or to take on what might seem to be an unusual or unimportant agenda without much risk. Junior or new politicians, in contrast, could tap into a young electorate, as well as normative discourses around tradition and change.

Societal factors: 'tradition' versus 'progress'

The men politicians framed the impact of social norms and culture on their willingness to embrace pro-feminist politics as a tension between tradition and progress, with religion and Westernisation serving as two key forces shaping this interaction, particularly in Malaysia. People's views on gender equality vary across the countries and topics. For example, with regards to women's political representation, there is a high level of bias held by Malaysians as shown in Table 4, although this falls to only 36% of the population in relation to education. Such views were also expressed by some Malay student participants, especially the young men, who had a positive view of the paternalism of the 'father figures' of former Prime Ministers.

Table 4: People's views on women in politics

Percentage of people with bias in the political dimension[4]		Percentage of people saying women should not have the same chance as men to be elected
Colombia	Malaysia	Liberia
54.14%	91.7%	22%

Sources: UNDP (2023), Afrobarometer (2023).

Religious influences as markers of traditional culture

The influence of religion emerges as particularly uneven across the countries, which is surprising, as all have significant religious majorities (summarised in Table 5), within which are many denominations and interpretations that are based on patriarchal gender values, roles and norms.

Table 5: Major religions by percentage of population

Colombia	Liberia	Malaysia
Roman Catholicism: 78.2%	Christianity (all denominations): 85.6%	Islam: 63.5%

Sources: Department of Statistics Malaysia (2020), National Administrative Department of Statistics (2022), Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-information Services (2023).

In Malaysia, for example, there is a consistent focus on religion, and Islam in particular, which is tied to ethnic Malay identity:

> **The biggest challenge for male politicians who are promoting gender equality is opposition from the Malay community based on the interpretation of religious texts that see gender equality as diluting Islam.**
> (Azmi et al., 2024: 31)

Here, men politicians think they are faced with criticism and opposition from the Malay public, who see gender equality initiatives and positions as a challenge to Islamic principles and traditional customs. Many of the politicians share this view, leading to a preference for a framing of gender equality that is based on women's empowerment or women's rights; while a number of politicians indicated that they saw no tension between their gender equality work and a strong commitment to Islam and the country's social norms. In contrast, men politicians of ethnic Chinese descent made no mention of this.

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4   The UNDP Index does not provide data for Liberia. Therefore, Liberian data are supplemented with data from the Afrobarometer survey. The UNDP index measures bias in the political dimension through two indicators from the World Value Survey tied to statements: 1) men make better leaders than women and 2) women having equal rights is essential for democracy.

Conversely, politicians and activists in Colombia and Liberia spoke less explicitly about the influence of Roman Catholicism and/or Protestant Christianity, although religious leaders in both countries have influence within the political systems, not least through the global anti-gender movement (Gifford, 2002; Levine, 2014). In an inversion of the Malaysian study, where religion was often a barrier, one of the main reasons why men politicians supported gender equality in Colombia and Liberia was because of their belief systems, which included social justice and religion. Men politicians utilised social justice and religious convictions in addition to their progressive views as justifications for their support of women's rights. One Liberian lawmaker stated:

> I tend to bear on the side of human rights, social and economic rights of people. Early on, I was attracted to the Catholic social teaching, options for the poor… I've always championed issues of the downtrodden and oppressed. That is my leaning in society. That is why I gravitate toward gender issues because I find villainous discrimination when it comes to women that have been long-standing, that is ridiculous and repugnant to how we should live as human beings.
> Man lawmaker, Liberia (quoted in Garnett et al., 2024: 27)

The picture in Liberia is more complicated, however, than the quote above would suggest. Some religious groups (and Christianity more widely) are contributing to the anti-feminist backlash by opposing, or at least postponing, progressive legislation. Some Catholic and Pentecostal churches, for example, are identifying members of their congregation who are legislators to oppose the Public Health Bill, which contains several pro-feminist provisions, such as safe abortion and sexual education in schools. Similarly, in Colombia there is some evidence that religious groups have contributed successfully to opposing certain policies and legislation (Corrêa, 2018). However, there is little discussion or analysis of the influence of religion in the collected data, either in relation to enabling or constraining men politicians' self-identification as feminist and work for gender equality.

This variability across the three countries might reflect wider societal differences in norms, as well as the personal beliefs of individual politicians who were recruited for the study, as noted in the limitations section. It also underscores the complex interactions of religions, diverse denominations and interpretations, and gender equality, despite the tendency of some feminists to simplistically perceive religion as the 'nemesis of gender equality' (Phillips, 2016: 41). At the same time, the varying influence of religion overlays the variability of explicit feminist activism and movements (discussed in previous sections). Ultimately, those countries where feminism has a relatively lesser impact (such as Malaysia) tend to be countries where religion has a greater influence. The reverse seems to be true in Colombia and Liberia, where the feminist movement has had a greater and more consistent influence.

Westernisation and international influences: challenge to tradition for some, progress for others

> Feminism is a big word… It entails a very big deep ideological and philosophical thought that I think is quite extreme at one time. So, I do not consider myself as a feminist in that sense: a western sense of feminism.
> Man politician, Malaysia (quoted in Azmi et al., 2024: 26)

Closely linked to religion as a driving force of people's values and culture, men politicians were also influenced by discourses of Westernisation and international influence more broadly, as a challenge to traditional culture or markers of progress. While some feminist thought – problematically influenced by colonialism – perceives gender equality to be tied to Westernisation as progress, a more complex and varied picture emerges across the three countries in relation to the understanding of Westernisation as an enabling or prohibiting factor for the gender equality agenda and for political

masculinities in particular. This mirrors the uneven influence of what Myrttinen (2019) has called HeforShe political masculinities, which are influenced and shaped by international political actors (such as UN Women). It also underscores the need for a decolonial lens in understanding the impact of hegemonic masculinity on political masculinities within post-colonial contexts, as the identity of men politicians in relation to feminism and the gender equality agenda has been used for the othering of marginalised men over centuries.

For example, there appears to be relatively less international influence on Colombian men politicians that would be seen as external or as an imposition of new social norms in terms of shaping their commitment to gender equality than in the other two studies. There is little discussion of any assumptions between Westernisation and gender-equality for the men politicians. Beyond the adoption of international legislation such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and the alignment of the Colombian government with the HeforShe campaign, international influences appear to have had relatively little influence for the men politicians, despite their importance for women's activism in, for example, the post-conflict period.

The politicians did not present their support for gender equality as a sign of progress or alignment with 'the West' though – as discussed in the next section – men who support gender equality are perceived by young people as progressive. Instead, the 'traditional' culture in Colombia is associated with rural areas rather than the country as a whole – a perception that can most likely be attributed to the strong national feminist presence and its recognised histories. The tensions, therefore, lie in the urban-rural divide, rather than a struggle between the global and local, with the rural settings being seen as more patriarchal.

Conversely, Liberian men politicians engaged with and reflected extensively on assumed connections between Westernisation, progress and gender-equality. Many Liberian traditionalists view legal and socioeconomic modifications to the customary system as an imposition of Western norms. The fact that international players, such as UN Women, advocate for legislative changes related to LGBTQI+, human, and gender equality rights, exacerbates this viewpoint. As one lawmaker put it:

> Because in getting more women in politics, we're trying to reconcile two forces: African culture and traditions, and Westernisation.
> Man lawmaker, Liberia (quoted in Garnett et al., 2024: 28)

This man politician draws a distinction between traditional gender norms and their progressive agendas for gender equality.

There is, therefore, an implicit dichotomy between progress, Westernisation and gender equality on the one hand, and tradition on the other. This is disputed and challenged by some politicians, while others embrace it to build their political brand and appeal. While a number of ethnicity-based factions and associated political parties emerged in Liberian politics during the post-conflict period, the religious and traditional narratives were not tied to ethnicity as an intersecting factor.

Similarly, several Malaysian men politicians see a problematic association between gender equality, progress and Westernisation. Such positions and assumptions had negative implications for the engagement of these men with gender equality, in contexts where to be associated with 'Western' values can be damaging and have negative connotations for them or some members of their electorate. Indeed, for some, feminism was seen as a Western concept that promoted women's superiority, leading them to believe that feminism is not indigenous to Malaysia. Because of its alleged and assumed 'incompatibility' with Islam, Malaysian society views Western (presumably

Christian or secular) feminist philosophy as possibly detrimental. In other words, Islam was central to consolidating the connections between Westernisation and gender equality:

> While I acknowledge the importance of women, I'm not inclined to push for complete equality from a Western perspective or the United Nations' conventions... I don't want to be included as a women's right warrior.
> Male politician, Malaysia (quoted in Azmi et al., 2024: 29)

At the same time, some politicians differentiated between gender equality and progress on one hand, and Westernisation and feminism on the other.

The differences across the three countries could be the result of their varying de-and post-colonial histories, and the resulting development of: aid dependency on institutions in the Global North and their relative power in local politics; the visibility and longevity of indigenous feminist activism; and the extent of each country's integration into the global racialised systems of power. It must be recognised that while the charge of feminism as a Western imposition was key for several men, women in politics did not raise this debate as a challenge for their work on gender equality.

Generational change towards progressive gender norms?

Many activists and women politicians have suggested that younger generations of men in and out of politics, as understood in each country, are more likely to embrace the feminist label or at least use a progressive standpoint for its refusal. There is, therefore, a widespread belief that generational change means a move away from 'traditional' patriarchal norms. This is evident within this study: the only politician in Liberia who labelled himself as a feminist was a candidate from a younger group of politicians. However, being relatively younger does not always or automatically mean feminist or pro-feminist views. Other variables seem to be equally important, such as levels of education and exposure to certain knowledge, not least from feminist movements.

As the authors of the Liberian case study highlight, the younger generations in Liberia were exposed to the presidency of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who came into power in a post-conflict context. Elsewhere, studies from countries such as Rwanda highlight that conflicts can be crucial instigators for gender norm transformation (Bauer and Burnet, 2013; Harper et al., 2020). Younger generations have more experience of women's political leadership and have been exposed to narratives of improving gender equality (Garnett et al., 2024), as seen in several democracies, where younger generations of men and women are more accepting of women as political leaders and more likely to challenge normative assumptions (Taylor-Robinson and Geva, 2023).

Nevertheless, approaching gender equality as an inevitable, automatic progress tied to either economic development or democratisation and generational change conflicts with evidence of the non-linear and at times regressive changes within and across generations, despite some evidence of such correlations (Inglehart and Norris, 2003). For example, studies of the generation Z in some high-income countries, such as the USA, UK and Germany, show growing social conservatism. There is, therefore, limited evidence that a new generation means more progressive gender norms (Betts Razavi, 2024; Duffy et al., 2024). This was seen, for example, with some younger men politicians in Malaysia, who were educated in Western universities and rejected feminism as incompatible with Malay social norms.

Failing to change the [masculine] face of politics

> **Sometimes even tokenistic acts of support may have positive effects by raising awareness and by affirming egalitarian norms.**
> (Kutlaca and Radke, 2023: 8)

In response to research question three on the ways in which men politicians were seen by participants to be feminists, women politicians, activists and students of both genders tended to struggle to identify any across the three study countries. While some politicians were considered to be gender equality allies, although not feminists, they were often perceived as not being committed enough to the cause or to be vocal and active enough to transform patriarchal norms in politics or society in any meaningful way, as would be expected of feminist men in positions of power. As such, they were often seen as performative and inauthentic, untrustworthy in their pro-feminist or pro-equality politics, and as leaving intact the overall perception of politics as a harmful masculine space where women are marginalised and excluded.

The findings within this section echo the existing allyship literature reviewed in the report, which underscores the disadvantaged groups' suspicion of allies' motivations, as well as the influence of the political system on the potential of politicians to be role models or allies (Michalko, 2021). With the exception of some student groups that perceive some benefits in limited allyship action, the positive effects of the merely performative allyship, as suggested by Kutlaca and Radke (2023) at the opening of this section, seem to be undermined by the overall distrust of people in positions of power, whether they are men in the patriarchy or politicians in parliaments and governments.

Distrust of politics and power

> **When participants were asked how they would describe the typical behaviour of men in politics in Liberia, [they said]... that politicians are self-centred, domineering, conceited, deceptive, exploitative, patriarchal, patrilineal and insensitive, especially to the plight of women in particular, and the plight of citizens in general.**
> (Garnett et al., 2024: 33)

As the quote above suggests, students' perceptions of men politicians in Liberia were negative, sceptical, and distrustful of their genuine interest in women's equality and representing the interests of the people. As Table 6 shows, the three countries are experiencing varying levels of a 'trust deficit' in key political institutions and actors, including MPs.

As table 6 shows, people in Colombia had the lowest levels of trust in political actors. This was reflected amongst the research participants, who questioned the intentions behind performances of politicians like President Petro, particularly during the electoral campaign season. Yet, the congruence between students' political (leftist) values and the politicians' party (left) affiliation made young women, for example, more likely to believe in the genuine interest of men politicians in the gender equality agenda. Even so, they remained sceptical, overall, about the intentions of men politicians, given their lack of a personal stake in the gender equality agenda or involvement in gender equality work over a long period of time.

Table 6: Measures of trust in political institutions

Indicator	Colombia	Liberia	Malaysia
Freedom House Global ranking out of 195 countries	Partially free[5] 64	Partially free 60	Partially free 50
Transparency International Corruption Perception Index[6] Global ranking out of 180 countries	40 87	25 145	50 57
Various studies of trust in political actors	Overall: below 12% Political parties: 7%	MPs: 23% President: 36.8%	Government:67% Politicians: 44%

Source: World Bank (n.d. a)

Liberia has the highest level of perceived corruption of the three countries, which could help explain the students' view that politicians are driven by self-interest and financial gain – described as 'cash violence'. A compounding factor could be levels of economic inequality and hardship in Colombia and Liberia in particular, as captured in Table 7.

Table 7: Levels of economic inequality and poverty

Indicator	Colombia	Liberia	Malaysia
Gini Coefficient[7]	51.5% (2021)	35.3% (2016)	41.2% (2018)
% of population living below national poverty line(s)	39.3 (2021)	50.9 (2016)	6.2 (2021)

Source: World Bank (n.d. b)

A 2020 poll by Ipsos found that Malaysians had the highest levels of trust in political institutions among the three study countries, even though the government and politicians remain some of the least trusted institutions in comparison to teachers, doctors or businesses (Ipsos, 2020). This comparatively higher level of trust and low level of perceived corruption could help to explain why some men students looked up to men politicians, together with other societal factors discussed in previous sections (such as religious and class-based patriarchal norms).

'Men are not doing enough'

The motivations of men politicians were not discussed explicitly in relation to distrust, yet feminist activists, women politicians and students alike questioned whether men politicians had a genuine commitment to gender equality. These doubts were based on a belief that men politicians are not doing enough, and that they focus on electoral victory and voter mobilisation, rather than doing the work of representing the interests of all people, as discussed in the previous section.

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[5]   Partially free status is assigned based on scores on civic liberties and political rights. It represents one of three scoring assessments, including free and unfree. For more information on the methodology behind the scores please refer to the Freedom House (2023) website.

[6]   The value represents a score out of 100 points. Higher scores represent better, 'cleaner' performance of the given country.

[7]   A statistical measure of income, wealth, or consumption inequality within a nation or a social group. Perfect equality is a score of 0.

The expected level of action varied by country and stakeholder groups. Activists and feminist politicians in particular tended to have high expectations of what a 'genuine' feminist or gender equality supporter would look like, and felt that men often fell short of that ideal. Some students, however, particularly those who were less politicised by their feminisms, had different and lower, expectations. In Liberia, many students recognised some pro-feminist commitments in the actions of former President Weah, who appointed women into key positions. Yet, in a critique of Weah, they expected an authentic, self-declared feminist and gender equality supporter like him to do more to address key issues like GBV or women's exploitation in the education sector. Here, the distrust of men politicians based on their insufficient action was framed as men not truly caring about gender equality.

In Colombia, an LGBTQI+ activist summarised the low expectations of pro-feminist politicians in terms of altering patriarchal or macho attitudes:

> Do men in politics change because they talk about gender and diversities? No, they don't change, they continue to be macho, they continue to be patriarchal, they continue to be racist, classist, but let's say, they comply, they are going to do it in the exercise and in the function of their work as governors.
> LGBTQI+ activist, Colombia (quoted in Serrano Amaya and García Suarez, 2024: 38)

Similar themes are observed within the Malaysian study, where women politicians interpreted the efforts of their male counterparts as betraying a lack of sincere conviction and wanted their allies to show their commitment by taking more tangible steps. For example, a woman politician from a youth-focused political party said that her party, which is headed by a man, is working to provide women more room and chances to be nominated and elected to positions of leadership. This can be explained, in part, by women having been at the forefront the country's feminist movement and the historical lack of sustained engagement and support from men over the years, which suggests that the behaviour of the men politicians could be a deceptive tactic to gain popularity.

High levels of distrust in politicians were not mentioned by the men politicians themselves as a factor that would inhibit their ability to work on gender equality or adopt a feminist label, nor as a factor that could create a barrier in connecting with feminist movements and women politicians. However, it could be argued that the emphasis of men politicians on 'acting', rather than just talking about their commitment to gender equality and feminism, is a response to their concern over people's distrust in politicians who are not seen to deliver on their electoral promises and stay true to their word – described by one of the Colombian participants as being a 'media feminist'. It is also possible that men politicians are unaware that some local feminist movements are uncomfortable with their efforts to promote gender equality.

Summary of findings

The *Men in politics as agents of gender equitable change* study has provided a unique cross-country, comparative analysis of gender norms and other factors that shape how men politicians who support gender equality in Colombia, Liberia and Malaysia engage with feminist politics. As well as analysing the narratives of men politicians within each study country, this study – the first of its kind – includes the analysis of other essential voices in relation to gender equality in politics, such as women politicians, activists and students. The findings, drawing on a small-scale qualitative research project, illuminate a challenging relationship between men politicians and feminist politics, even in country contexts where feminist policies are debated in the political arena. A refusal to adopt a feminist identity and a determination to embrace various alternatives emerges, even though men recognise that their positions of power and privilege enables them to be agents of change and have sympathy for the goal of improving women's lives. The challenges to their full and impactful engagement relate more widely to longstanding tensions around men's involvement with feminism and with feminist movements at local, regional and global levels.

As the study shows, it is crucial to consider the factors that either enable or act as a barrier to their engagement across three spheres – personal, institutional and societal – and their interaction with each other. For example, while the knowledge and awareness of individual men politicians is often limited, they might be willing and able to embrace feminism if they have an enabling context within their political institutions to overcome isolation and mobilise coalitions. In addition, as was found across the three country studies, men with experiences of social justice movements, and who have strong female figures and role models in their lives, do exercise agency and take up the cause, even if only as sympathisers and supporters for women's initiatives.

One of the more striking findings is that global and wider international influences emerge as having only a limited explicit impact for the men politicians in this study. The original expectation was that global actors and instruments, including HeForShe, UN conventions such as CEDAW, and UN conferences such as Beijing, as well as anti-gender actors and organisations, would be key factors in their own right. This assumption was based on the critical role that these actors and instruments have played – whether positively or negatively – for feminist organising and women's rights activism since the 1990s. However, the data and analysis emerging from the three country studies find that these influences were limited to Liberia or were only implicit. Such insights suggest the need for country-specific approaches when making investments in pro-gender equality initiatives.

In addition, men politicians showed a relatively consistent lack of intersectional reflection and insight into gender equality, with the notable exception of some in Colombia. Their gender equality work was focused almost exclusively on cis-women, with men and boys emerging as being 'ungendered' and masculinities tending to be overlooked. As a result, masculinities and LGBTQI+ identities are not being emphasised by men politicians, even when actors who are not women are shaping agendas.

This also relates to a surprising lack of engagement by the men politicians with their own performances of masculinity beyond a mere recognition of their privileged positions and their power to effect change. There is only limited insights into the extent to which the men politicians performed their masculinity within the home, for example, however, insights from students, activists and women politicians suggest a lack of visibly different masculinities.

Theoretically, this study makes a substantive contribution to the political masculinities literature, although the allyship literature proved to be more useful for parts of the analysis. The innovative comparison across diverse socio-political conditions, including the embeddedness of feminist, gender equality, women's rights and masculinities discourses and actors in society, reveals that

men in politics who see the patriarchal subordination of women as a problem still continue to see themselves as standing alongside or behind the women who lead the struggle for gender equality, as allies and advocates.

If men in politics who support gender equality take up the feminist mantle beyond performative allyship, there is potential for them to help change the public perceptions of feminism and create broader coalitions between political actors and civil society for meaningful change and subversion of patriarchal norms. It should be noted that the research has not identified such practices currently taking place in the study countries.

As focus groups with students and activists demonstrated, distrust in men political elites can exacerbate the existing distrust of men as a privileged group as genuine agents of change. Such insights demonstrate that a multi-faceted approach is needed to create enabling conditions for male political allyship – an approach that has the potential to make a significant contribution to wider efforts for the achievement of gender equality.

As more donors consider supporting men as agents of change for gender equality, this report echoes the need to keep feminist movements at the forefront of the work with men politicians. It is vital to ensure resources and the potential for wider transformative work on gender equality led by feminist movements are not diverted and diluted.

Implications for policy and practice

As the research findings demonstrate, the factors that enable men in politics to support feminist and gender equality agendas are influenced by an array of institutions and actors, not least gender norms, feminist movements and political leaders. As a result, donors who support feminist movements and women's political empowerment can consider actions to enhance men's feminist allyship in four key areas, which are summarised in this section.

The study does not suggest that the investment of resources into increasing men's embrace of feminist politics should be prioritised over other routes to gender equality. Instead, initiatives that seek to target men in politics specifically should maintain resources for feminist organisations and wider movements and create synergies and connections to men politicians.

Men politicians working with feminist movements and civil society

1. Increase knowledge, networks and collaboration on gender equality

The study finds that improved knowledge of inequalities (sometimes based on personal experience) enables men in politics to support feminism, even if they refuse the feminist label for themselves. Men who do not come from social justice movements or who have never experienced intersectional inequalities could actively learn from and with feminist politicians and activists, particularly those who are locally embedded, to improve their understanding of the feminist work that is taking place in their contexts. This learning should be rooted in critical self-assessment and reflection, based on evidence of good practice.

Men in politics who are interested in gender equality could take an active role in connecting with feminist leaders and women with lived experience of gender inequality in their personal and professional lives. They can create and consolidate spaces within and across political parties for feminist encounters and initiatives, aiming to work to transform the political institutions in which they operate. These institutions have the potential to drive the sustainable and systematic changes that are needed, and insights from feminist research on women's representation underscores the need to move beyond the training of individuals (Piscopo, 2022). These learnings and engagements could increase the overall ease of men politicians with feminist values, principles, and the agendas of their peers and institutions, leading ultimately to a more explicit engagement with feminisms, be it as allies, advocates or feminists.

Given the high levels of distrust of men politicians as gender equality allies, men in politics ought to consider good practices of male allyships (as listed in Box 2), not least holding themselves accountable to feminist movements. These practices could reduce the trust deficit and demonstrate their genuine allyship through action. This could enable better relationship building with other feminist actors.

Genuine acts of allyship could entail the consideration of men politicians' own gender performances beyond political action, such as appointing women to key roles, and embedding such practices in their institutional culture, particularly formal rules and norms. Such considerations of one's own masculinity and the norms that it either transgresses or maintains, are, according to the research findings, implicit in the politicians' understanding of their own power and privilege. However, there is a gap in their explicit understanding of the impact of the performances of masculinities in maintaining the political culture in their institutions and politics as a public sphere.

2. Develop resources, training and networking opportunities with and for men in politics

Given the frequent misunderstanding and lack of knowledge among men politicians about feminism and gender more broadly, feminist actors could support them and their key institutional support structures (such as technical assistants) by developing resources and training specifically for them. Several global networks and initiatives, many spearheaded by feminist or pro-feminist men, have existing resources that are based on the experience of working with men on gender equality and feminist agendas. These resources can be leveraged and used to decrease the already-high burden and agenda of women-led feminist organisations.

These initiatives should identify men who are most likely to support gender equality. There were men in the research country case studies who were interested in the topic and who were either in the highest echelons of power (with political and social capital as well as decision making power within political parties) or young men who are part of a next generation of politicians, whose pro-gender equality values are more accepted, and who seek to build their identity as progressive leaders. Such initiatives are likely to improve the ways in which politics is implemented, as well as increasing the positive impacts of men politicians who are committed to gender equality.

At the same time, the targeting of groups of men for such interventions must be designed within the context of political institutions in which they operate. The men need to be considered on a case-by-case basis, as levels of experience in politics are not automatic predictors of support for gender equality. Learning from feminist work with women in politics, it is prudent to avoid approaching individual men who might not be able, on their own, to drive the changes that are needed in their parties.

Knowledge building efforts that target these men could:

- demystify feminism and inform politicians about histories and concepts tied to feminism in the local context, gender equality, and masculinities, including intersectionality, as the study reveals a tendency among men politicians to homogenise and essentialise women's experiences

- communicate the perceptions of feminism and gender equality among the general public, and outline effective narratives used by movements to explain the feminist agenda to a wide audience, to reduce politicians' concerns about negative electoral repercussions over time

- highlight the tensions of allyship (not least the reasons why some feminists may be hesitant to involve men in their activism and politics), and establish a sense of accountability for their actions to feminist actors

- provide an overview of international actors and movements working with men in politics, such as UN Women's HeforShe, to better link men into global networks, such as the MenEngage Alliance, and thus create a support community in response to feelings of isolation found in the research.

Concurrent and reinforcing efforts could create networks, communities and spaces where men in politics and their support structures can learn with feminist movements and one another. As the findings suggest, a lack of domestic in- and cross-party coalitions and networks is an obstacle for collective and meaningful action, and these networking and collective engagements could help to build trust and decrease the fear of political risks or costs associated with the feminist agenda. They can help men identify role models and mentors among men politicians and build support mechanisms for collective strategising.

It must be recognised that these research implications increase the already high workload and burden that feminist movements and organisations face. While the research responded to the call for men to 'step up' and take an active role in gender equality and alleviate some of the pressure on feminist actors, the findings suggest that their active role and engagement might have to persist until more men-led feminist action has been established.

Cross-stakeholder action

3. Create an enabling socio-political environment by strengthening democratic institutions and feminist movements and targeting anti-gender actors

While not recognised explicitly by the men politicians, a silent and powerful force within the study was the global anti-gender movement and its impact on the cost of doing pro-gender equality work for men politicians. Other studies highlight the well-funded networks and the transnational travel of discourses and ideas (Lewin, 2021; McEwen and Narayanaswamy, 2023) some of which were manifest in the study countries, particularly in relation to anti-Westernisation and the colonial imposition of feminism and gender equality.

While some of the politicians in the study were adopting their own anti-feminist and anti-gender stances, many of them were refusing feminism in response to what they perceived as anti-gender and anti-feminist stances among voters and political peers. For suggested action to decrease the impact of anti-gender actors see, for example, Khan et al., (2023).

The findings of this research demonstrate the need to address low levels of trust in political institutions. As democracies are perceived by citizens to be failing to deliver the desired well-being, initiatives that restore trust in elected representatives, including in men political elites, could offer a wider supportive infrastructure for gender equality and other social justice causes (see for example Weinberg (2023) or OECD (2022)). Strengthening democracies, the rule of law and the credibility of institutions in gender equitable and transformative ways would also create an enabling environment for feminist movements, which face global shortages of funding and resources.

Feminist movements often operate at the intersection of various human rights and social justice causes and could be supported in their efforts, both through direct funding mechanisms and broader democratic strengthening, in order to collaborate with men in politics and build stronger networks and coalitions. At the moment, most funding does not enable such strategic feminist work (Khan et al., 2023).

Research

4. Expand future research to include other men, women and gender-diverse people in politics, as well as populations outside of students in the Global South

Future research could expand the number and diversity of men political participants to better nuance the understanding of various factors that shape their gender equality work and engagement with feminist politics. These include, for example, members of the judiciary (such as members of Supreme Courts) or religious bodies (such as Supreme Councils). At the same time, researchers should move beyond masculinities attached to men and consider the permeations of masculinities of women and gender-diverse individuals in politics to better understand how feminist politics and gender norms interact (Pullen and Vachhani, 2018).

Similarly, future research could focus on other members of the public beyond the activists and university students that were the subject of this study. As students and activists represent a very small and exceptional, yet important, cohorts, studies with other members of the youth cohort or people with other educational backgrounds are crucial for a fuller understanding of the potential impact of politicians on norms. With the ongoing dominance of the Global North research in political masculinities, it would be useful to prioritise a focus on the countries of the Global South, preferably led by its researchers or academics.

Finally, future studies could look at larger sample sizes and, consequently, adopt additional, relevant methods to assess how men politicians from a range of political backgrounds are perceived when it comes to gender agendas. This would enable the exploration of factors, such as political party affiliation, with relevant data.

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Annexes

Annex 1: Political country profiles

The following overviews are adapted excerpts from country reports by Serrano-Amaya and García Suarez (2024), Garnett et al. (2024), and Azmi et al. (2024) respectively.

Colombia

Colombia is a presidential participatory democracy. At the provincial level, the executive power is constituted by department governors, municipal mayors and local administrators for administrative subdivisions such as city councillors. The Congress of the Republic is elected every 4 years and consists of 108 senators who are elected from national lists, and 188 representatives who are elected from territorial lists. Colombia has maintained a two-party system since the mid-nineteenth century, defined as liberal and conservative parties. After the constitutional reform of 1991, a heterogeneity of parties was created, and a weak relationship between those competing for elected positions and the parties or movements they intend to represent. There are currently 35 registered political parties in Colombia.

The current president, Gustavo Petro, began his term in 2022 as the first leftist leader to hold such a position. His presidency was preceded by a series of social unrest and mobilisations between 2018 and 2021 across the country, led by young people. There were protests against government measures that increased social inequalities, which had worsened as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent economic crisis.

Poverty and inequality are evident across the country. Although some progress has been made, significant structural gender inequalities and gaps persist in economic and social indicators. In 2022, 36.6% of Colombians were in poverty and 13.8% in extreme poverty. The Gini coefficient was 55.6%, which positions the country as one of the most unequal in the world and the second in Latin America and the Caribbean, after Brazil. In addition, the participation of women in the labour market increased from 46.4% to 53.1% between 2008 and 2019.

There is a minimum quota of 30% of representation of women in the management positions of public entities. In 2021, 46% of decision-making positions in public administration were occupied by women, which can be seen as a sign of progress. However, only 86 of the 296 seats in Congress are occupied by women (29%). Interestingly, 75.2% of population consider gender equality in politics a condition of democracy.

Colombia experienced armed conflict of varying intensity from the 1960s, with a major milestone being the 2016 peace agreement with the armed rebel group *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC), which was, however, rejected at first by the general public. Various armed groups and factions continue to perpetuate violence against the civilian population. Political conflict is also highly gender divided: of the 9,250,453 victims of armed sociopolitical violence recognised in February 2022, 4,519,288 were women (48.9%); of all victimised women, 91.1 % suffered forced displacement. Regarding the sexual violence that occurred during the armed conflict, 31,303 of the 34,209 registered victims were women (91.5%).

Liberia

Black Americans who had been returned to Africa established Liberia in 1847, and the True Whig Party governed the country as a one-party oligarchy until a coup in 1980. This heralded the start of political unrest and bloody civil war, which subsided until rebel commander and eventual president Charles Taylor was driven from power in 2003. In 2005, after a fiercely politicised and highly gendered election, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf became the continent's first female president. The subsequent transfer of power to George Manneh Weah in 2017 marked the country's first peaceful transfer of power since 1944.

Almost 20 years have passed since the end of Liberia's civil war in 2003. There has been significant progress on restoring democratic freedoms and the rule of law, despite continuous high rates of corruption, unemployment, poverty and illiteracy, as well as the insufficient delivery of essential social services like healthcare and education. There is a clear separation between rural and urban areas, with social services and business activity centred in Monrovia, the capital.

With a similar constitution, parallel governmental structures, three branches of government (executive, judicial, and legislative), and a bicameral legislature, Liberia's political system is modelled after the US political system. The United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy, which represented the Mandingo ethnic group, and the Independent National Patriotic Front, which represented the Gio and Mano ethnic groups, were formed during the 14-year conflict in Liberia, a multi-ethnic democracy. In the spirit of peacebuilding, however, the Johnson Sirleaf government distributed power among competing factions and shifted to administrative county representation, avoiding explicit mention of ethnicity.

Traditionally, the executive has held the majority of political authority and has controlled the other two branches. Political parties are free to establish and function, and there is political pluralism. As demonstrated by the Congress for Democratic Change (CDC) in 2017, opposition parties can and often do form coalitions and have a realistic chance of winning elections. The Constitution guarantees freedom of conscience, religion and thought. It also allows for the separation of church and state. Liberia is mostly a Christian nation, with 85% of its people identifying as Christians.

Women candidates from all registered political parties comprised 3.1% of the total from 2005 to 2015. Low literacy rates, particularly among women in rural areas, are a major contributing factor to the under-representation of women in politics. The National Legislature, a bicameral body that consists of the Senate and the House of Representatives and is predominantly male, proposed a gender quota law that was vetoed by then president Weah 2023. While 25 political parties pledged to implement a voluntary 30% quota prior to the October 2023, election, all parties failed to meet it.

In addition to political exclusion, women face high levels of sexual violence rooted in the years of civil war. For example, at the height of the COVID-19 epidemic in 2020, there were 2,240 cases of sexual assault, and approximately 1,975 occurrences of GBV were reported in 2022, with 73.7% of those cases being sexual assault, rape or other sexual offences.

Malaysia

With 13 states and 3 federal territories, Malaysia is a federal constitutional monarchy. It is governed by a three-tiered system that includes the federal, state, and local levels. Regular elections are held for both state and federal offices every five years. The central government and the states each have different roles and obligations within the federal system. The majority winning party is in charge of the federal government, which is responsible for defence, foreign policy and general economic planning. States have jurisdiction over matters pertaining to land, agriculture, local governance and

Islamic issues. Every state has a Sultan or Ruler who serves as its head of state; the Chief Minister is chosen to supervise state operations and carry out policies inside the framework of the federal constitution. None of these roles are currently filled by women.

Nine states are governed by the Pakatan Harapan (PH) federal coalition administration, which was elected in 2022 and is made up of four major political parties. The largest opposition bloc, the National Alliance or Perikatan Nasional (PN), is in charge of four states. There are four prominent political parties with different political identities and beliefs: some are Islamist and conservative, others promote multiculturalism and liberal democracy or Malay nationalism. Some ethno-religious parties have expanded their membership to accommodate people of all ethnicities.

Elections are conducted using the first-past-the-post method. As a result of the competitive system's one seat per district, women are less likely to be nominated, with men still making most of the decisions within political parties. In order to form a majority government in Malaysia, a party or coalition needs to win two-thirds of the contested parliamentary seats. This means that out of the 222 parliamentary seats contested, at least 112 must be won for a party to obtain overall control.

While a resolution promising to guarantee at least 30% of female candidates in general election was signed by key party leaders in 2022, none of the parties fulfilled this promise, with the greatest number of female candidates fielded reaching 25.5%. Even after 65 years of independence, there are still few women in positions of leadership in politics in Malaysia. The 187 women nominated for state assembly seats and parliamentary seats accounted for only 13.48% of the whole field of candidates. However, women's movements have played a significant role in shaping the debates and realities around the role of women in Malaysian politics and society more widely.

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About ALIGN

ALIGN is a digital platform and programme of work that supports a global community of researchers, practitioners and activists, all committed to gender justice and equality. It provides new research, insights from practice, and grants for initiatives that increase our understanding of – and work to change – discriminatory gender norms.

About this report

This Malaysia country report is part of ALIGN's 'Men in politics as agents of gender equitable change: gender norms and political masculinities' series.

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